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MORNING SEGW'S THE DAY

UNCOMMON PEOPLE

Short Stories

BY

HELEN HULL



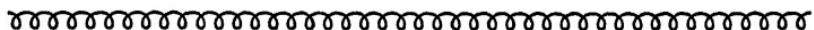
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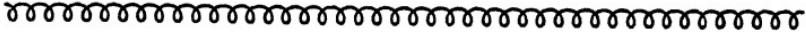
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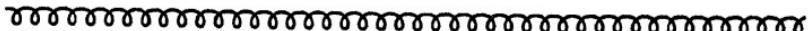
The Touchstone for "Waiting" and "Men of Their Race," first published in *The Touchstone*.



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UNCOMMON
PEOPLE



CLAY-SHUTTERED DOORS

FOR months I have tried not to think about Thalia Corson. Anything may invoke her, with her langorous fragility, thin wrists and throat, her elusive face with its long eyelids. I can't quite remember her mouth. When I try to visualize her sharply I get soft pale hair, the lovely curve from her temple to chin, and eyes blue and intense. Her boy, Fletcher, has eyes like hers.

To-day I came back to New York, and my taxi to an up-town hotel was held for a few minutes in Broadway traffic where the afternoon sunlight fused into a dazzle a great expanse of plateglass and elaborate show motor cars. The "Regal Eight"—Winchester Corson's establishment. I huddled as the taxi jerked ahead, in spite of knowledge that Winchester would scarcely peer out of that elegant setting into taxi cabs. I didn't wish to see him, nor would he care to see me. But the glimpse had started the whole affair churning again, and I went through it deliberately, hoping that it might have smoothed out into some rational explanation. Sometimes things do, if you leave them alone, like logs submerged in water that float up later, encrusted thickly. This affair won't add to itself. It stays unique and smooth, sliding through the rest of life without annexing a scrap of seaweed.

I suppose, for an outsider, it all begins with the moment on Brooklyn Bridge; behind that are the years of my friend-

ship with Thalia. Our families had summer cottages on the Cape. She was just enough older, however, so that not until I had finished college did I catch up to any intimacy with her. She had married Winchester Corson, who at that time fitted snugly into the phrase "a rising young man." During those first years, while his yeast sent up preliminary bubbles, Thalia continued to spend her summers near Boston, with Winchester coming for occasional week ends. Fletcher was, unintentionally, born there; he began his difficult existence by arriving as a seven-months baby. Two years later Thalia had a second baby to bring down with her. Those were the summers which gave my friendship for Thalia its sturdy roots. They made me wonder, too, why she had chosen Winchester Corson. He was personable enough; tall, with prominent dark eyes and full mouth under a neat mustache, restless hands, and an uncertain disposition. He could be a charming companion, sailing the catboat with dash, managing lobster parties on the shore; or he would, unaccountably, settle into a foggy grouch, when every one—children and females particularly—were supposed to approach only on tiptoe, bearing burnt offerings. The last time he spent a fortnight there, before he moved the family to the new Long Island estate, I had my own difficulties with him. There had always been an undertone of sex in his attitude toward me, but I had thought "that's just his male conceit." That summer he was a nuisance, coming upon me with his insistent, messy kisses, usually with Thalia in the next room. They were the insulting kind of kisses that aren't at all personal, and I could have ended them fast enough if there hadn't been the complication of Thalia and my love for her. If I made Winchester angry he'd put an end to Thalia's relation to me. I didn't, anyway, want her to know what a fool he was. Of course she did know, but I thought then that I could protect her.

There are, I have decided, two ways with love. You can hold one love, knowing that, if it is a living thing, it must develop and change. That takes maturity, and care, and a consciousness of the other person. That was Thalia's way. Or you enjoy the beginning of love and, once you're past

that, you have to hunt for a new love, because the excitement seems to be gone. Men like Winchester, who use all their brains on their jobs, never grow up; they go on thinking that preliminary stir and snap is love itself. Cut flowers, that was Winchester's idea, while to Thalia love was a tree.

But I said Brooklyn Bridge was the point at which the affair had its start. It seems impossible to begin there, or anywhere, as I try to account for what happened. Ten years after the summer when Winchester made himself such a nuisance—that last summer the Corsons spent at the Cape—I went down at the end of the season for a week with Thalia and the children at the Long Island place. Winchester drove out for the week end. The children were mournful because they didn't wish to leave the shore for school; a sharp September wind brought rain and fog down the Sound, and Winchester nourished all that Sunday a disagreeable grouch. I had seen nothing of them for most of the ten intervening years, as I had been first in France and then in China, after feature-article stuff. The week had been pleasant: good servants, comfortable house, a half-moon of white beach below the drop of lawn; Thalia a stimulating listener, with Fletcher, a thin, eager boy of twelve, like her in his intensity of interest. Dorothy, a plump, pink child of ten, had no use for stories of French villages or Chinese temples. Nug, the wire-haired terrier, and her dolls were more immediate and convincing. Thalia was thin and noncommittal, except for her interest in what I had seen and done. I couldn't, for all my affection, establish any real contact. She spoke casually of the town house, of dinners she gave for Winchester, of his absorption in business affairs. But she was sheathed in polished aloofness and told me nothing of herself. She did say, one evening, that she was glad I was to be in New York that winter. Winchester, like his daughter Dorothy, had no interest in foreign parts once he had ascertained that I hadn't even seen the Chinese quarters of the motor company in which he was concerned. He had an amusing attitude toward me: careful indifference, no doubt calculated to put me in my place as no longer alluring. Thalia tried to coax him into listening to some of

my best stories. "Tell him about the bandits, Mary"—but his sulkiness brought, after dinner, a casual explanation from her, untinged with apology. "He's working on an enormous project, a merging of several companies, and he's so soaked in it he can't come up for a breath."

In the late afternoon the maid set out high tea for us, before our departure for New York. Thalia suggested that perhaps one highball was enough if Winchester intended to drive over the wet roads. Win immediately mixed a second, asking if she had ever seen him in the least affected. "Be better for you than tea before a long damp drive, too." He clinked the ice in his glass. "Jazz you up a bit." Nug was begging for food and Thalia, bending to give him a corner of her sandwich, apparently did not hear Winchester. He looked about the room, a smug, owning look. The fire and candlelight shone in the heavy waxed rafters, made silver beads of the rain on the French windows. I watched him—heavier, more dominant, his prominent dark eyes and his lips sullen, as if the whiskey banked up his temper rather than appeased it.

Then Jim, the gardener, brought the car to the door; the children scrambled in. Dorothy wanted to take Nug, but her father said not if she wanted to sit with him and drive.

"How about chains, sir?" Jim held the umbrella for Thalia.

"Too damned noisy. Don't need them." Winchester slammed the door and slid under the wheel. Thalia and I, with Fletcher between us, sat comfortably in the rear.

"I like it better when Walter drives, don't you, Mother?" said Fletcher as we slid down the drive out to the road.

"Sh—Father likes to drive. And Walter likes Sunday off, too." Thalia's voice was cautious.

"It's too dark to see anything."

"I can see lots," announced Dorothy, whereupon Fletcher promptly turned the handle that pushed up the glass between the chauffeur's seat and the rear.

The heavy car ran smoothly over the wet narrow road, with an occasional rumble and flare of headlights as some car swung past. Not till we reached the turnpike was there

much traffic. There Winchester had to slacken his speed for other shiny beetles slipping along through the rain. Sometimes he cut past a car, weaving back into line in the glaring teeth of a car rushing down on him, and Fletcher would turn inquiringly toward his mother. The gleaming, wet darkness and the smooth motion made me drowsy, and I paid little heed until we slowed in a congestion of cars at the approach to the bridge. Far below on the black river, spaced red and white stars suggested slow-moving tugs, and beyond, faint lights splintered in the rain hinted at the city.

"Let's look for the cliff dwellers, Mother."

Thalia leaned forward, her fine, sharp profile dimly outlined against the shifting background of arches, and Fletcher slipped to his feet, his arm about her neck. "There!"

We were reaching the New York end of the bridge, and I had a swift glimpse of their cliff dwellers—lights in massed buildings, like ancient camp fires along a receding mountain side. Just then Winchester nosed out of the slow line, Dorothy screamed, the light from another car tunneled through our windows, the car trembled under the sudden grip of brakes, and like a crazy top spun sickeningly about, with a final thud against the stone abutment. A shatter of glass, a confusion of motor horns about us, a moment while the tautness of shock held me rigid.

Around me that periphery of turmoil—the usual recriminations, "what the hell you think you're doing?"—the shriek of a siren on an approaching motor cycle. Within the circle I tried to move across the narrow space of the car. Fletcher was crying; vaguely I knew that the door had swung open, that Thalia was crouching on her knees, the rain and the lights pouring on her head and shoulders; her hat was gone, her wide fur collar looked like a drenched and lifeless animal. "Hush, Fletcher." I managed to force movement into my stiff body. "Are you hurt? Thalia—" Then outside Winchester, with the bristling fury of panic, was trying to lift her drooping head. "Thalia! My God, you aren't hurt!" Some one focussed a searchlight on the car as Winchester got his arms about her and lifted her out through the shattered door.

Over the springing line of the stone arch I saw the cliff dwellers' fires and I thought as I scrambled out to follow Winchester, "She was leaning forward, looking at those, and that terrific spin of the car must have knocked her head on the door as it lurched open."

"Lay her down, man!" An important little fellow had rushed up, a doctor evidently. "Lay her down, you fool!" Some one threw down a robe, and Winchester, as if Thalia were a drowned feather, knelt with her, laid her there on the pavement. I was down beside her and the fussy little man also. She did look drowned, drowned in that beating sea of tumult, that terrific honking of motors, unwilling to stop an instant even for—was it death? Under the white glare of headlights her lovely face had the empty shallowness, the husklikeness of death. The little doctor had his pointed beard close to her breast; he lifted one of her long eyelids. "She's just fainted, eh, doctor?" Winchester's angry voice tore at him.

The little man rose slowly. "She your wife? I'm sorry. Death must have been instantaneous. A blow on the temple."

With a kind of roar Winchester was down there beside Thalia, lifting her, her head lolling against his shoulder, his face bent over her. "Thalia! Thalia! Do you hear? Wake up!" I think he even shook her in his baffled fright and rage. "Thalia, do you hear me? I want you to open your eyes. You weren't hurt. That was nothing." And then, "Dearest, you must!" and more words, frantic, wild words, mouthed close to her empty face. I touched his shoulder, sick with pity, but he staggered up to his feet, lifting her with him. Fletcher pressed shivering against me, and I turned for an instant to the child. Then I heard Thalia's voice, blurred and queer, "You called me, Win?" and Winchester's sudden, triumphant laugh. She was standing against his shoulder, still with that husklike face, but she spoke again, "You did call me?"

"Here, let's get out of this." Winchester was again the efficient, competent man of affairs. The traffic cops were shouting, the lines of cars began to move. Winchester couldn't start his motor. Something had smashed. His card

and a few words left responsibility with an officer, and even as an ambulance shrilled up, he was helping Thalia into a taxi. "You take the children, will you?" to me, and "Get her another taxi, will you?" to the officer. He had closed the taxi door after himself, and was gone, leaving us to the waning curiosity of passing cars. As we rode off in a second taxi, I had a glimpse of the little doctor, his face incredulous, his beard wagging, as he spoke to the officer.

Dorothy was, characteristically, tearfully indignant that her father had left her to me. Fletcher was silent as we bumped along under the elevated tracks, but presently he tugged at my sleeve, and I heard his faint whisper. "What is it?" I asked.

"Is my mother really dead?" he repeated.

"Of course not, Fletcher. You saw her get into the cab with your father."

"Why didn't Daddy take us too?" wailed Dorothy, and I had to turn to her, although my nerves echoed her question.

The house door swung open even as the taxi bumped the curb, and the butler hurried out with an umbrella which we were too draggled to need.

"Mr. Corson instructed me to pay the man, madam." He led us into the hall, where a waiting maid popped the children at once into the tiny elevator.

"Will you wait for the elevator, madam? The library is one flight." The butler led me up the stairs, and I dropped into a low chair near the fire, vaguely aware of the long, narrow room, with discreet gold of the walls giving back light from soft lamps. "I'll tell Mr. Corson you have come."

"Is Mrs. Corson—does she seem all right?" I asked.

"Quite, madam. It was a fortunate accident, with no one hurt."

Well, perhaps it had addled my brain! I waited in a kind of numbness for Winchester to come.

Presently he strode in, his feet silent on the thick rugs.

"Sorry," he began, abruptly. "I wanted to look the children over. Not a scratch on them. You're all right, of course?"

"Oh, yes. But Thalia—"

"She won't even have a doctor. I put her straight to bed—she's so damned nervous, you know. Hot-water bottles . . . she was cold. I think she's asleep now. Said she'd see you in the morning. You'll stay here, of course." He swallowed in a gulp the whiskey he had poured. "Have some, Mary? Or would you like something hot?"

"No, thanks. If you're sure she's all right I'll go to bed."

"Sure?" His laugh was defiant. "Did that damn fool on the bridge throw a scare into you? He gave me a bad minute, I'll say. If that car hadn't cut in on me—I told Walter last week the brakes needed looking at. They shouldn't grab like that. Might have been serious."

"Since it wasn't—" I rose, wearily, watching him pour amber liquid slowly into his glass—"if you'll have some one show me my room—"

"After Chinese bandits, a little skid ought not to matter to you." His prominent eyes gleamed hostilely at me; he wanted some assurance offered that the skidding wasn't his fault, that only his skill had saved all our lives.

"I can't see Thalia?" I said.

"She's asleep. Nobody can see her." His eyes moved coldly from my face, down to my muddy shoes. "Better give your clothes to the maid for a pressing. You're smeared quite a bit."

I woke early, with clear September sun at the windows of the room, with blue sky behind the sharp city contours beyond the windows. There was none too much time to make the morning train for Albany, where I had an engagement that day, an interview for an article. The maid who answered my ring insisted on serving breakfast to me in borrowed elegance of satin negligée. Mrs. Corson was resting, and would see me before I left. Something—the formality and luxury, the complicated household so unlike the old days at the Cape—accented the queer dread which had filtered all night through my dreams.

I saw Thalia for only a moment. The heavy silk curtains were drawn against the light and in the dimness her face seemed to gather shadows.

"Are you quite all right, Thalia?" I hesitated beside her

bed, as if my voice might tear apart the veils of drowsiness in which she rested.

"Why, yes—" as if she wondered. Then she added, so low that I wasn't sure what I heard, "It is hard to get back in."

"What, Thalia?" I bent toward her.

"I'll be myself once I've slept enough." Her voice was clearer. "Come back soon, won't you, Mary?" Then her eyelids closed and her face merged into the shadows of the room. I tiptoed away, thinking she slept.

It was late November before I returned to New York. Free-lancing has a way of drawing herrings across your trail and, when I might have drifted back in early November, a younger sister wanted me to come home to Arlington for her marriage. I had written to Thalia, first a note of courtesy for my week with her, and then a letter begging for news. Like many people of charm, she wrote indifferent letters, stiff and childlike, lacking in her personal quality. Her brief reply was more unsatisfactory than usual. The children were away in school, lots of cold rainy weather, everything was going well. At the end, in writing unlike hers, as if she scribbled the line in haste, "I am lonely. When are you coming?" I answered that I'd show up as soon as the wedding was over.

The night I reached Arlington was rainy, too, and I insisted upon a taxi equipped with chains. My brother thought that amusing, and at dinner gave the family an exaggerated account of my caution. I tried to offer him some futile sisterly advice and, to point up my remarks, told about that drive in from Long Island with the Corsons. I had never spoken of it before; I found that an inexplicable inhibition kept me from making much of a story.

"Well, nothing happened, did it?" Richard was triumphant.

"A great deal might have," I insisted. "Thalia was stunned and I was disagreeably startled."

"Thalia was stunned, was she?" An elderly cousin of ours from New Jersey picked out that item. I saw her fitting it

into some pigeonhole, but she said nothing until late that evening when she stopped at the door of my room.

"Have you seen Thalia Corson lately?" she asked.

"I haven't been in New York since September."

She closed the door and lowered her voice, a kind of avid curiosity riding astride the decorous pity she expressed.

"I called there, one day last week. I didn't know what was the matter with her. I hadn't heard of that accident."

I waited, an old antagonism for my proper cousin blurring the fear that shot up through my thoughts.

"Thalia was always *individual*, of course." She used the word like a reproach. "But she had *savoir faire*. But now she's—well—*queer*. Do you suppose her head was affected?"

"How is she queer?"

"She looks miserable, too. Thin and white."

"But how—"

"I am telling you, Mary. She was quite rude. First she didn't come down for ever so long, although I sent up word that I'd come up to her room if she was resting. Then her whole manner—well, I was really offended. She scarcely heard a word I said to her, just sat with her back to a window so I couldn't get a good look at her. When I said, 'You don't look like yourself,' she actually sneered. 'Myself?' she said. 'How do you know?' Imagine! I tried to chatter along as if I noticed nothing. I flatter myself I can manage awkward moments rather well. But Thalia sat there and I am sure she muttered under her breath. Finally I rose to go and I said, meaning well, 'You'd better take a good rest. You look half dead.' Mary, I wish you'd seen the look she gave me! Really I was frightened. Just then their dog came in, you know, Dorothy's little terrier. Thalia used to be silly about him. Well, she actually tried to hide in the folds of the curtain, and I don't wonder! The dog was terrified at her. He crawled on his belly out of the room. Now she must have been cruel to him if he acts like that. I think Winchester should have a specialist. I didn't know how to account for any of it; but of course a blow on the head can affect a person."

Fortunately my mother interrupted us just then, and I

didn't, by my probable rudeness, give my cousin reason to suppose that the accident had affected me, too. I sifted through her remarks and decided they might mean only that Thalia found her more of a bore than usual. As for Nug, perhaps he retreated from the cousin! During the next few days the house had so much wedding turmoil that she found a chance only for a few more dribbles: one that Thalia had given up all her clubs—she had belonged to several—the other that she had sent the children to boarding schools instead of keeping them at home. "Just when her husband is doing so well, too!"

I was glad when the wedding party had departed, and I could plan to go back to New York. Personally I think a low-caste Chinese wedding is saner and more interesting than a modern American affair. My cousin "should think I could stay home with the family," and "couldn't we go to New York together, if I insisted upon gadding off?" We couldn't. I saw to that. She hoped that I'd look up Thalia. Maybe I could advise Winchester about a specialist.

I did telephone as soon as I got in. That sentence "I am lonely," in her brief note kept recurring. Her voice sounded thin and remote, a poor connection, I thought. She was sorry. She was giving a dinner for Winchester that evening. The next day?

I had piles of proof to wade through that next day, and it was late afternoon when I finally went to the Corson house. The butler looked doubtful but I insisted, and he left me in the hall while he went off with my card. He returned, a little smug in his message: Mrs. Corson was resting and had left word she must not be disturbed. Well, you can't protest to a perfect butler, and I started down the steps, indignant, when a car stopped in front of the house, a liveried chauffeur opened the door, and Winchester emerged. He glanced at me in the twilight and extended an abrupt hand.

"Would Thalia see you?" he asked.

"No." For a moment I hoped he might convoy me past the butler. "Isn't she well? She asked me to come to-day."

"I hoped she'd see you." Winchester's hand smoothed at

his little mustache. "She's just tired from her dinner last night. She overexerted herself, was quite the old Thalia." He looked at me slowly in the dusk, and I had a brief feeling that he was really looking at me, no, *for* me, for the first time in all our meetings, as if he considered me without relation to himself for once. "Come in again, will you?" He thrust away whatever else he thought of saying. "Thalia really would like to see you. Can I give you a lift?"

"No, thanks, I need a walk." As I started off I knew the moment had just missed some real significance. If I had ventured a question... but, after all, what could I ask him? He had said that Thalia was "just tired." That night I sent a note to her, saying I had called and asking when I might see her.

She telephoned me the next day. Would I come in for Thanksgiving? The children would be home, and she wanted an old-fashioned day, everything but the sleigh ride New York couldn't furnish. Dinner would be at six, for the children; perhaps I could come in early. I felt a small grievance at being put off for almost a week, but I promised to come.

That was the week I heard gossip about Winchester, in the curious devious way of gossip. Atlantic City, and a gaudy lady. Some one having an inconspicuous fortnight of convalescence there had seen them. I wasn't surprised, except perhaps that Winchester chose Atlantic City. Thalia was too fine; he couldn't grow up to her. I wondered how much she knew. She must, years ago, with her sensitiveness, have discovered that Winchester was stationary so far as love went and, being stationary himself, was inclined to move the object toward which he directed his passion.

On Thursday, as I walked across Central Park, gaunt and deserted in the chilly afternoon light, I decided that Thalia probably knew more about Winchester's affairs than gossip had given me. Perhaps that was why she had sent the children away. He had always been conventionally discreet, but discretion would be a tawdry coin among Thalia's shining values.

I was shown up to the nursery, with a message from

Thalia that she would join me there soon. Fletcher seemed glad to see me, in a shy, excited way, and stood close to my chair while Dorothy wound up her phonograph for a dance record and pirouetted about us with her doll.

"Mother keeps her door tight locked all the time," whispered Fletcher doubtfully. "We can't go in. This morning I knocked and knocked but no one answered."

"Do you like your school?" I asked cheerfully.

"I like my home better." His eyes, so like Thalia's with their long, arched lids, had young bewilderment under their lashes.

"See me!" called Dorothy. "Watch me do this!"

While she twirled I felt Fletcher's thin body stiffen against my arm, as if a kind of panic froze him. Thalia stood in the doorway. Was the boy afraid of her? Dorothy wasn't. She cried, "See me, Mother! Look at me!" and in her lusty confusion, I had a moment to look at Thalia before she greeted me. She was thin, but she had always been that. She did not heed Dorothy's shrieks, but watched Fletcher, a kind of slanting dread on her white, proud face. I had thought, that week on Long Island, that she shut herself away from me, refusing to restore the intimacy of ten years earlier. But now a stiff loneliness hedged her as if she were rimmed in ice and snow. She smiled. "Dear Mary," she said. At the sound of her voice I lost my slightly cherished injury that she had refused earlier to see me. "Let's go down to the library," she went on. "It's almost time for the turkey." I felt Fletcher break his intent watchfulness with a long sigh, and as the children went ahead of us, I caught at Thalia's arm. "Thalia—" She drew away, and her arm, under the soft flowing sleeve of dull blue stuff, was so slight it seemed brittle. I thought suddenly that she must have chosen that gown because it concealed so much beneath its lovely embroidered folds. "You aren't well, Thalia. What is it?"

"Well enough! Don't fuss about me." And even as I stared reproachfully she seemed to gather vitality, so that the dry pallor of her face became smooth ivory and her eyes were no longer hollow and distressed. "Come."

The dinner was amazingly like one of our old holidays. Winchester wore his best mood, the children were delighted and happy. Thalia, under the gold flames of the tall black candles, was a gracious and lovely hostess. I almost forgot my troublesome anxiety, wondering whether my imagination hadn't been playing me tricks.

We had coffee by the library fire and some of Winchester's old Chartreuse. Then he insisted upon exhibiting his new radio. Thalia demurred, but the children begged for a concert. "This is their party, Tally!" Winchester opened the doors of the old teakwood cabinet which housed the apparatus. Thalia sank back into the shadows of a wing chair, and I watched her over my cigarette. Off guard, she had relaxed into strange apathy. Was it the firelight or my unaccustomed Chartreuse? Her features seemed blurred as if a clumsy hand trying to trace a drawing made uncertain outlines. Strange groans and whirrs from the radio.

"Win, I can't stand it!" Her voice dragged from some great distance. "Not to-night." She swayed to her feet, her hands restless under the loose sleeves.

"Static," growled Winchester. "Wait a minute."

"No!" Again it was as if vitality flowed into her. "Come, children. You have had your party. Time to go upstairs. I'll go with you."

They were well trained, I thought. Kisses for their father, a curtsy from Dorothy for me, and a grave little hand extended by Fletcher. Then Winchester came toward the fire as the three of them disappeared.

"You're good for Thalia," he said in an undertone. "She's—well, what do you make of her?"

"Why?" I fenced, unwilling to indulge him in my vague anxieties.

"You saw how she acted about the radio. She has whims like that. Funny, she was herself at dinner. Last week she gave a dinner for me, important affair, pulled it off brilliantly. Then she shuts herself up and won't open the door for days. I can't make it out. She's thin—"

"Have you had a doctor?" I asked banally.

"That's another thing. She absolutely refuses. Made a

fool of me when I brought one here. Wouldn't unlock her door. Says she just wants to rest. But—" he glanced toward the door—"do you know that fool on the bridge...that little runt? The other night, I swear I saw him rushing down the steps as I came home. Thalia just laughed when I asked about it."

Something clicked in my thoughts, a quick suspicion, drawing a parallel between her conduct and that of people I had seen in the East. Was it some drug? That lethargy, and the quick spring into vitality? Days behind a closed door—

"I wish you'd persuade her to go off for a few weeks. I'm frightfully pressed just now, in an important business matter, but if she'd go off—maybe you'd go with her?"

"Where, Winchester?" We both started, with the guilt of conspirators. Thalia came slowly into the room. "Where shall I go? Would you suggest—Atlantic City?"

"Perhaps. Although some place farther south this time of year—" Winchester's imperturbability seemed to me far worse than some slight sign of embarrassment; it marked him as rooted in successful deceit whether Thalia's inquiry were innocent or not. "If Mary would go with you. I can't get away just now."

"I shall not go anywhere until your deal goes through. Then—" Thalia seated herself again in the wing chair. The hand she lifted to her cheek, fingers just touching her temple beneath the soft drift of hair, seemed transparent against the firelight. "Have you told Mary about your deal? Winchester plans to be the most important man on Automobile Row." Was there mockery in her tone? "I can't tell you the details, but he's buying out all the rest."

"Don't be absurd. Not all of them. It's a big merging of companies, that's all."

"We entertain the lords at dinner, and in some mysterious way that smooths the merging. It makes a wife almost necessary."

"Invite Mary to the next shebang, and let her see how well you do it." Winchester was irritated. "For all your

scoffing, there's as much politics to being president of such a concern as of the United States."

"Yes, I'll invite Mary. Then she'll see that you don't really want to dispense with me—yet."

"Good God, I meant for a week or two."

As Winchester, lighting a cigarette, snapped the head from several matches in succession, I moved my chair a little backward, distressed. There was a thin wire of significance drawn so taut between the two that I felt at any moment it might splinter in my face.

"It's so lucky—" malice flickered on her thin face—"that you weren't hurt in that skid on the bridge, Mary. Winchester would just have tossed you in the river to conceal your body."

"If you're going over that again!" Winchester strode out of the room. As Thalia turned her head slightly to watch him, her face and throat had the taut rigidity of pain so great that it congeals the nerves.

I was silent. With Thalia I had never dared intrude except when she admitted me. In another moment she too had risen. "You'd better go home, Mary," she said slowly. "I might tell you things you wouldn't care to live with."

I tried to touch her hand, but she retreated. If I had been wiser or more courageous, I might have helped her. I shall always have that regret, and that can't be much better to live with than whatever she might have told me. All I could say was stupidly, "Thalia, if there's anything I can do! You know I love you."

"Love? That's a strange word," she said, and her laugh in the quiet room was like the shrilling of a grasshopper on a hot afternoon. "One thing I will tell you." (She stood now on the stairway above me.) "Love has no power. It never shouts out across great space. Only fear and self-desire are strong."

Then she had gone, and the butler appeared silently, to lead me to the little dressing room.

"The car is waiting for you, madam," he assured me, opening the door. I didn't want it, but Winchester was waiting, too, hunched angrily in a corner.

"That's the way she acts," he began. "Now you've seen her I'll talk about it. Thalia never bore grudges, you know that."

"It seems deeper than a grudge," I said cautiously.

"That reference to the... the accident. That's a careless remark I made. I don't even remember just what I said. Something entirely inconsequential. Just that it was damned lucky no one was hurt when I was putting this merger across. You know if it'd got in the papers, it would have queered me. Wrecking my own car... there's always a suspicion you've been drinking. She picked it up and won't drop it. It's like a fixed idea. If you can suggest something. I want her to see a nerve specialist. What does she do behind that locked door?"

"What about Atlantic City?" I asked abruptly. I saw his dark eyes bulge, trying to ferret out my meaning, there in the dusky interior of the car.

"A week there with you might do her good." That was all he would say, and I hadn't courage enough to accuse him, even in Thalia's name.

"At least you'll try to see her again," he said, as the car stopped in front of my apartment house.

I couldn't sleep that night. I felt that just over the edge of my squirming thoughts there lay clear and whole the meaning of it all, but I couldn't reach past thought. And then, stupidly enough, I couldn't get up the next day. Just a feverish cold, but the doctor insisted on a week in bed and subdued me with warnings about influenza.

I had begun to feel steady enough on my feet to consider venturing outside my apartment when the invitation came, for a formal dinner at the Corsons'. Scrawled under the engraving was a line, "Please come. T." I sent a note, explaining that I had been ill, and that I should come—the dinner was a fortnight away—unless I stayed too wobbly.

I meant that night to arrive properly with the other guests, but my watch, which had never before done anything except lose a few minutes a day, had gained an unsuspected hour. Perhaps the hands stuck—perhaps— Well, I was told I was early, Thalia was dressing, and only the children,

home for the Christmas holidays, were available. So I went again to the nursery. Dorothy was as plump and unconcerned as ever, but Fletcher had a strained, listening effect and he looked too thin and white for a little boy. They were having their supper on a small table, and Fletcher kept going to the door, looking out into the hall. "Mother promised to come up," he said.

The maid cleared away their dishes, and Dorothy, who was in a beguiling mood, chose to sit on my lap and entertain me with stories. One was about Nug the terrier; he had been sent out to the country because Mother didn't like him any more.

"I think," interrupted Fletcher, "she likes him, but he has a queer notion about her."

"She doesn't like him," repeated Dorothy. Then she dismissed that subject, and Fletcher too, for curiosity about the old silver chain I wore. I didn't notice that the boy had slipped away, but he must have gone down stairs; for presently his fingers closed over my wrist, like a frightened bird's claw, and I turned to see him, trembling, his eyes dark with terror. He couldn't speak but he clawed at me, and I shook Dorothy from my knees and let him pull me out to the hall.

"What is it, Fletcher?" He only pointed down the stairway, toward his mother's door, and I fled down those stairs. *What* had the child seen?

"The door wasn't locked—" he gasped behind me—"I opened it very still and went in—"

I pushed it ajar. Thalia sat before her dressing table, with the threefold mirrors reiterating like a macabre symphony her rigid, contorted face. Her gown, burnished blue and green like peacock's feathers, sheathed her gaudily, and silver, blue, and green chiffon clouded her shoulders. Her hands clutched at the edge of the dressing table. For an instant I could not move, thrust through with a terror like the boy's. Then I stumbled across the room. Before I reached her, the mirrors echoed her long shudder, her eyelids dragged open, and I saw her stare at my reflection wavering toward her. Then her hands relaxed, moved

quickly toward the crystal jars along the heavy glass of the table and, without a word, she leaned softly forward, to draw a scarlet line along her white lips.

"How cold it is in here," I said, stupidly, glancing toward the windows, where the heavy silk damask, drawn across, lay in motionless folds. "Fletcher said—" I was awkward, an intruder.

"He startled me." Her voice came huskily. She rouged her hollow cheeks. It was as if she drew another face for herself. "I didn't have time to lock the door." Then turning, she sought him out, huddled at the doorway, like a moth on a pin of fear. "It wasn't nice of you, Son. It's all right now. You see?" She rose, drawing her lovely scarf over her shoulders. "You should never open closed doors." She blew him a kiss from her finger tips. "Now run along and forget you were so careless."

The icy stir of air against my skin had ceased. I stared at her, my mind racing back over what I knew of various drugs and the stigmata of their victims. But her eyes were clear and undilated, a little piteous. "This," she said, "is the last time. I can't endure it." And then, with that amazing flood of vitality, as if a sudden connection had been made and current flowed again, "Come, Mary. It is time we were down stairs."

I thought Fletcher peered over the railing as we went down. But a swift upward glance failed to detect him.

The dinner itself I don't remember definitely except that it glittered and sparkled, moving with slightly alcoholic wit through elaborate courses, while I sat like an abashed poor relation at a feast, unable to stop watching Thalia, wondering whether my week of fever had given me a tendency to hallucinations. At the end a toast was proposed, to Winchester Corson and his extraordinary success. "It's done, then?" Thalia's gayety had sudden malice—as she looked across at Winchester, seating himself after a slightly pompous speech. "Sealed and cemented forever?"

"Thanks to his charming wife, too," cried a plump, bald man, waving his glass. "A toast to Mrs. Corson!"

Thalia rose, her rouge like flecked scarlet on white

paper. One hand drew her floating scarf about her throat, and her painted lips moved without a sound. There was an instant of agitated discomfort, as the guests felt their mood broken so abruptly, into which her voice pierced, thin, high. "I... deserve... such a toast—"

I pushed back my chair and reached her side.

"I'll take her—" I saw Winchester's face, wine-flushed, angry rather than concerned. "Come, Thalia."

"Don't bother. I'll be all right—now." But she moved ahead of me so swiftly that I couldn't touch her. I thought she tried to close her door against me, but I was too quick for that. The silver candelabra still burned above the mirrors. "Mary!" Her voice was low again as she spoke a telephone number. "Tell him *at once*." She stood away from me, her face a white mask with spots of scarlet, her peacock dress ashimmer. I did as I was bid and when I had said, "Mrs. Corson wishes you at once," there was an emptiness where a man's voice had come which suggested a sudden leap out of a room somewhere.

"I can never get in again!" Her fingers curled under the chiffon scarf. "Never! The black agony of fighting back—if he—" She bent her head, listening. "Go down to the door and let him in," she said.

I crept down the stairs. Voices from the drawing-room. Winchester was seeing the party through. Almost as I reached the door and opened it I found him there: the little doctor with the pointed beard. He brushed past me up the stairs. He knew the way, then! I was scarcely surprised to find Thalia's door fast shut when I reached it. Behind it came not a sound. Fletcher, like an unhappy sleepwalker, his eyes heavy, slipped down beside me, clinging to my hand. I heard farewells, churring of taxis and cars. Then Winchester came up the stairs.

"She's shut you out?" He raised his fist and pounded on the door. "I'm going to stop this nonsense!"

"I sent for a doctor," I said. "He's in there."

"Is it—" his face was puffy and gray—"that same fool?"

Then the door opened, and the man confronted us.

"It is over," he said.

"What have you done to her?" Winchester lunged toward the door, but the little man's lifted hand had dignity enough somehow to stop him.

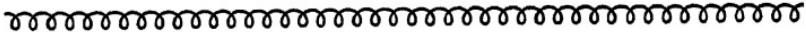
"She won't come back again." He spoke slowly. "You may look if you care to."

"She's dead?"

"She died—months ago. There on the bridge. But you called to her, and she thought you wanted—*her*."

Winchester thrust him aside and strode into the room. I dared one glance and saw only pale hair shining on the pillow. Then Fletcher flung himself against me, sobbing, and I knelt to hold him close against the fear we both felt.

What Winchester saw I never knew. He hurled himself past us, down the stairs. And Thalia was buried with the coffin lid fast closed under the flowers.



WAITING

WHEN Anne Stephens, in her early forties, reached the plain to which her life had climbed, and looked back along the path she had come, some half a dozen incidents stood out clearly defined. In their place along the path they had seemed no more prominent than many others. But from her final elevation much of the rest was lost, too vague, too hidden in underbrush to be visible.

She remembered one still, white winter day. She must have been very young, for she was small enough to sit unobserved beneath the window bench in her father's work shop. Content, still and white as the day, filled her. She watched the colorless vibrations above the small rusty stove in the corner and sniffed the comforting air, thick with fresh paint and sawdust. Her father worked above her, humming under his breath. That feeling of content must have been his, too. Perhaps hers came from him. He was making something, a case for the works of an old clock, she thought. Then the door flew open, and crisp, sharp as the winter air, her mother stood on the threshold, her blue eyes hard and snapping.

"So you're out here, wasting your day, John Stephens, when you might be finding something useful to do!"

Her father stepped away from the bench so that his curly fair hair no longer caught the pale sun. He smiled apologetically.

"Put away your rubbish and go help Johnnie in the store. If you can't get work for every day for yourself, the least you could do as a man is to be of use to your son! Is that Anne, now, under the bench? Come into the house."

Her mother slammed the door and was gone, but the still content had fled. Anne crawled out, shaking the shaving curls from her hair. Her father fingered the polished boards on his bench, and then picked up the tools.

"It's the fun there is in making things. The only joy that is good. Women don't know it—the joy of making."

Then there was a night, how much later Anne did not know, when she woke with her heart cold at the sound of her mother sobbing. She crept out to the head of the stairs to listen.

"It's only that she isn't good enough for you, my Johnnie, my first-born! Johnnie, I've worked my fingers to the bone for you—slaved for you—to give you what you desired—and you have no more love for me, your mother!"

And then a voice cajoling, caressing, John, her oldest brother.

"Now, mother, can't a man take a wife? A man has a mother and he wants a wife, too, doesn't he? Now, mother—"

Anne knew that her mother had thrown her arms about John's neck. She had always known that her mother loved John more than the rest of them.

"Go your way!" her mother's voice shrilled out. "You're cruel, stubborn and set. Keep her away from me, I tell you. I'll hate her!"

"Now, mother, you wouldn't. I'm bringing her home for dinner this Sunday, and I'll show her what a mother I've got. You'll be used to the feeling by then."

"Leave me alone! I'll have no more to do with you!"

Anne had crawled hastily back to bed, and had listened in the dark to the choking, sobbing breath of her mother as she climbed the stairs. Sunday John's sweetheart had come to dinner, and Anne had waited, tortured, for something to break. Her mother's cheeks were bright between

the smooth bands of her heavy hair, but John had thrown his arm over her shoulders and joked at his Marie—"See how you'll have to work to make up to me for leaving such a mother!" And nothing had happened.

Then there was the dreadful time after Pearce, the second brother, had come home from the west, where he had gone in search of gold and found only the seed of death, so that he lived but three days after he had come back. Anne felt the chill darkness of the house; it was as though the grave sod had been piled over them all. Her mother, coming into the house after the funeral, had stared for a moment at her father. Anne remembered her face distinctly. The skin had drawn tightly over the high cheekbones and temples, and a gray, dusty pallor lay upon it. She had gone into her room and locked the door. How many days had she stayed there? Anne heard her father begging outside the door, begging against that awful silence within. Finally he had cried, crouching on the floor, cried like a little child; then he had called out, "Unless you come out, Kate, I will bring my ax and chop down this damned door!"

Anne remembered the slow opening of the door, the dreadful pause while her mother stood above her father, staring down at him. She had said, "If part of my body was torn off, you would give it time to heal. And you can not let me be—" Suddenly her father had taken her mother in his arms, and she was crying, too. Anne had run away, out of the house.

Another thing she remembered. She had been sitting in a crotch of the old apple tree at the side of the house, sewing for a doll. She had a family of dolls whom she tended carefully, without enthusiasm. As she sewed, a wonderful idea had seized her, gripping her heart with its splendor until she was dizzy. She had climbed down from the tree and gone in quest of her mother. She had found her in her low rocker, sewing, her eyes shining. One of her rare, light moods was upon her. Anne stood in front of her, trembling, eager.

"Mother, will you—that is, I want—"

"Well? Don't stammer." How fast that little pricking sound of the needle ran!

"Will you tell me, please, where I can get a baby? Of my own? I must have a baby."

"What are you talking about?" Her mother dropped her sewing, wary suspicion in her eyes.

"I want a baby—" Anne found it difficult to say more.

"Who has been telling you things you shouldn't know? Come here!" Anne had shrunk away. "What are you talking about?"

"Nothing—I just thought it—please, mother!" She winced under her mother's sharp grasp.

"Have the children—" Her mother sighed. "Oh, you are so stubborn! Don't shut your mouth that way! What has been said to you about babies?"

"Nothing! Nothing!" Anne was hot with shame now, an inexplicable, harrowing shame.

"Well, think nothing of them, then. You're a baby yourself. Don't let me hear you talking of such things."

Anne had played no more with dolls.

One day at school the teacher had said, "Now, children, let's all think what we want to be when we are grown up." She had gone round the class until she came to Anne. "Anne, do you want to be a milliner or a teacher, too?" Anne shook her head. "No, I want to be a mother." The sound of the laughter, sudden like thunder, rattled against her still. She had never spoken her desire again.

After that came a stretch of years in which she made two discoveries. One was the magic of color and form; she could capture it with brush and paint, and the other was the extraordinary wonder of her own body. During the Christmas week of her last year in school her class had a sleigh ride. She had gone reluctantly. The drive was a blur of sensations: chill air tingling in her nostrils, the smell and crackle of hay in the huge bobs, sharp bells on the horses, the crunch under the runners, the yellow glow from the swinging lanterns. Songs and shouts and giggles, and then, on the way home, silence, with low whispers, until the boy next Anne had slipped his arm about her and pulled

her close against him. Strange, maddening thrill, all ecstasy and sweet shame. She had never seen the boy again; he was a cousin of some one, visiting. But the thrill became part of her dreams.

There was one dream. Sometimes she could cling to it when she had wakened. Sometimes she knew only from the still, white peace with which she woke that she had dreamed it. She lay in a great meadow which curved against a blue sky under the sun. No wind stirred. She lay there, not as herself, but as the meadow, part of the quiet, waiting soil.

In March of her year at the normal school, Anne met Robert Duffy. He had come over from the university for a short series of lectures. Anne had been unruffled by the comments upon him; he was the youngest man on the staff of the university, with a reputation of brilliance and the forecast of a great future. When he walked out on the platform, Anne, in her corner, leaned forward, the pupils of her eyes dilating. He was thin and dark, with hasty gestures, and a hostile eagerness sprang from his voice and eyes.

At the end of his second lecture, Anne waited at the edge of the crowd about the platform. She proffered some question, simple, almost irrelevant, and as he answered her, stood near him, her brow, her beautiful throat, her relaxed fingers, touched with subtle humility. After that he watched for her, and Anne's days leaped up like a ship at the flick of the wind. Robert Duffy may have thought he drove her down the seas before him. Anne knew.

He had not wished to marry so immediately. He was working for a degree, was developing a new chemical theory. But Anne, lifting his hands to clasp the pillar of her throat, had said, calmly,

"Why wait? You are tired and nervous now for some one to take care of you."

In April Anne was summoned home. Her mother had died suddenly. Her father wept for her as the young girl he had loved, and Anne, looking at the pale oval face between the sleek, dark wings of her hair, saw her for the first time as a woman of passion and force caught in too narrow an orbit.

The father went to live with John and his wife, and in June Anne was married. She remembered only one thing her father had said.

"I thought it might be, now, Annie, you would make an artist."

She had smiled and gone swiftly on with her preparations. Her mother's death had foreshortened life for her, until she felt at times a fear that she too might die with her desire unreached.

One of the next years there were two moments with sharp outlines; the rest blurred into full tide of passionate tenderness, fear, absorption. One moment was at night in that first summer. She and Robert walked along the river just outside the little college town, silent, until Robert turned on her.

"Where are you! I can't reach you," he had cried out. "I am afraid of you! You drown me, and I never touch you. What are you doing with me?"

She was glad of the darkness which hid the sudden fierce contraction of her body, hid the terror and hatred that leaped within her. But she had laughed softly and said, "You are tired. You work too hard," until he lay with his head against her breast, her fingers in his hair, while she stared with somber, heavy eyes at the pale glow on the water at her feet. She had been shamed at the coil of emotion his cry had struck, so that she had thrust the moment out of memory.

The other sharp moment was shortly before the birth of her second child. She lay on the couch in the sitting room, staring dully at the dingy carpet, the litter of papers on the desk. Margaret, who slept in her arms, had stirred, and the touch of that silky head in the curve under Anne's chin drew her up from her apathy. Robert came to the door, and she knew the conflict she had waited for was upon her.

"I understand you have talked with Samuels," Robert began. "You might have said so—all this time!"

"I thought you would wish to make your decision yourself."

Robert slumped into a chair near the desk. She thought for the first time that she knew how he would look as an old man, the eagerness drained out of his dark face.

"Samuels told you his offer, of course? I harness my brains to his chemical plant for life."

"He said there would be opportunity for you to carry on any experiments you wished." Her voice trailed off wearily, as though she had no spirit for a fight.

"You'd like me to take it?"

"Only if you wish." She pressed that small, silky head against her throat.

"You know what I want! To go on my own path—" He stopped.

"Have you thought of the children?"

"You give me small chance to think of anything else!"

She turned her face away from him, her eyes closed. Presently he rose heavily.

"Very well. Have it your way."

"No, Robert. You must decide. Are you so sure your own path leads anywhere?" She saw in his eyes the great weight of her own passive, inert body, of her gray immobility.

"I was, once. Anne, I don't mean to be selfish—" He flung out his hands, with their slender, nervous fingers, in a limp, impotent gesture. "Samuels' offer is profitable. I am taking it."

"Why so tragic, Robert?" Her words hurried slightly. "Even if you leave your university for some one who appreciates your value, you'll still have time for your own work, evenings and all."

"Turn off an idea after dinner!" He broke off into an ugly little laugh. "Have you no comprehension of the way creative work must be done? How you wait and wait while it grows within you? You can't just do it forcibly overnight. But I said I was taking Samuels' offer. I'll become his well-paid consulting chemist."

When he had gone, Anne laid her lips gently against the fragrant warm crease of Margaret's neck, her eyes closed to hide their triumph.

After that, ten years in which Anne had been as God walking in his garden. Her children were the miracle, herself extended beyond her own narrow limits, the work of her flesh and her spirit. In them she was fulfilled, and in their growth she saw her own work. Her passion was not that of the mother so much as that of the artist. She could have created pictures; instead she chose to create human beings. Robert begged her to spend less time with the children, to leave them, and she brushed his words carelessly aside.

Almost overnight, it seemed, Jamie, the youngest, was four, sandy-haired, chunky, jolly, and Margaret, fourteen, was a tall, slim thing with dark eyes and hasty gestures like her father. She developed stubborn, reticent moments, against which Anne thrust herself vainly.

Anne's first jealousy licked through her veins when she saw Margaret, after a long afternoon curled up with a book, silent, almost sullen at Anne's approach, fling aside book and mood at her father's homecoming. Anne heard them in the library, Margaret's light voice chording with Robert's tone. She went to the door, shaken with a forlorn desire to beg them to admit her, but pride held her outside.

The sound of those voices, however, stood out as the first, faint rumble in Anne's clear sky. "It was ridiculous of Robert to take the child so seriously, to talk with her as though she were a grown person," she thought; she added hastily, a surface thought, "Of course, I want the children to be real friends with their father. It's only that he's spoiling her!"

Margaret came in from school one day, her eyes alight.

"Mother, the girls are going to Miss Truesdale's camp this summer. Could I go?"

Anne asked which girls were going, and added, gently, "Mother would rather have her girl with her."

"Oh, mother!" cried Margaret, and then was silent, her whole slight figure stiffening into protest.

"Wouldn't you rather stay with mother?"

Margaret lifted her dark eyes, and Anne had a sudden impulse to seize her, to shake out of her the hostility that

lay within her glance. But she said, with her persistent gentleness, "At any rate, I should have to know more of the camp before I could decide."

At the sight of Margaret rushing down to meet her father that evening, Anne's decision clicked into shape. She would send the child to the camp. It would, after all, be excellent training, with the regularity of the life, and all. Margaret had been growing too fast and perhaps studying too hard. She was over-emotional.

Margaret came back after two months in the mountains, brown, slim, apparently docile. Anne had moved her household to the shore, near enough town so that Robert could spend week-ends with them. The second week of Margaret's return Anne discovered that her casual manner of wandering down the road in the early afternoon had a definite motive; she went to intercept the postman.

Anne's first thought was one of horror. Had a silly flirtation started? Surely Margaret was too young for that! She was only a little girl.

The next afternoon Anne followed with swift, silent feet, when she saw Margaret start down the lane. She found her on a bench near the tennis court, her dark head and slim brown throat bent over a letter.

"Oh, she is beautiful," thought Anne, "this young girl-child of mine! I won't have her touched—not yet—"

At her feet on the gravel, Margaret crumpled the letter into her pocket and flung back her head, scarlet running into the tan of her cheeks.

"A letter?" said Anne, as she sat down beside Margaret. "How nice!"

Margaret slipped to the end of the bench; in her bright eyes something fluttered desperately, seeking escape.

"Who is writing to you?" Anne kept her voice gentle, in spite of the inflexible impulse behind her words. As Margaret rose, poised at the edge of flight, she added, "If I weren't sure of you, Margie, I should think you were hiding something you were ashamed of!" She saw the girl flinch.

"It's nothing," she protested. "Just from a friend, from Miss Innsmere at the camp."

"Won't you show me her letter?" Anne sat very quiet. She stretched out one firm white hand toward Margaret, and her face showed nothing of the sharp fear that circled within her. Was Margaret lying to her? "You see, mother doesn't know her."

"It's just a letter to me." The girl's hand clenched over her pocket and she retreated a step.

Anne rose deliberately and laid her fingers on the girl's wrist. She was taller than Margaret; the child was a reed she could bend in her fingers. But the quiver of the wrist under her fingers disturbed her, and unexpectedly, she was aghast at the flame of defiance that leapt in the dark pupils of the girl's eyes.

In that moment Margaret wrenched her wrist free, and with a fierce "Oh-h—" was running across the tennis court toward the shore.

At luncheon Anne felt Margaret's eyes touch her warily; she paid no heed. Once when Margaret was a mere baby she had been stubborn, and Anne by quiet ignoring of her had brought her swiftly to her arms in hot tears.

Then she knew that she must see that letter. Quickly she went along the hall to Margaret's room. She must protect the child. There lay the child's dress, but her fingers found no letter in the pocket. She stood in front of the little white desk, with a faint smile at the tiny yellow shells laid in a row along the top, and the flat, bleached sand-dollars one at each corner of the blue blotter. Just a child, after all! Like a distant echo Anne felt the slow rhythm of the days before Margaret's birth, when all her life had turned inward, dream-woven, to the making of this child.

There in one of the pigeonholes were the letters. Anne hesitated. Margaret need never know; there seemed no other way. She brushed aside the strange qualm and drew out the letters, several of them, addressed to Miss Margaret Duffy, in a bold, square hand. Freda Innsmere, Truesdale Camp, on the flap. At least the child hadn't lied. She had the folded sheet in her fingers when behind her she heard

a little strangled cry, and turning, she faced Margaret. She made an instinctive motion of concealment, but the envelope slipped to the floor. For an instant, as the wide, incredulous horror of Margaret's gaze traveled from that white square up to her mother's face, Anne shared that horror, as though she saw her guilty reflection in the girl's dark stormy eyes. Only for an instant. Then she spoke, crisply,

"I am sorry, Margaret. But if you insist upon concealment, it is necessary for me to do this."

Margaret stood motionless, a little figure of bronze, save for her quick breathing.

"Perhaps you came back to hide these letters?" Anne added cruelly. She saw the adorable young curves of shoulder and knee melt from bronze to trembling flesh. "Unless you are ashamed, Margie, why do you hide them from mother?" Her voice filled again with its soft, rich tones. "Come, sit here beside me, and tell me about this new friend."

Margaret shrank away from her outstretched hands, retreated along the end of the bed, clinging to the footrails, her knuckles showing white through the tan.

"Oh, you shouldn't touch them!" she cried out. "They are mine—and you shouldn't touch them!"

"Margaret, dear, mother wants only what is best for you. You know that. This woman has made you secretive, ashamed."

"I'm not ashamed!" Margaret's lips struggled with tears.

Anne lifted the sheet and unfolded it. With a swift movement Margaret was in front of her.

"If you read that—I—I'll hate you!" she cried.

Anne dropped the letter and pulled the girl into her warm embrace.

"Margie, little Margie! You are my daughter! Flesh of my flesh, spirit of my spirit! I won't have a stranger standing between us!" She felt the child's tears on her throat, felt her body stiffen within her arms. "I shall not read those letters against your will. But you will bring them to me."

She went slowly from the room. She turned at the door;

Margaret stood motionless, her head averted. Something in her posture tore at Anne, like a rending of flesh from flesh. A strange fear hurried at her heels down the hall. Later she knew what that pain and fear had been; worse than birth-anguish, they were the labor pains of her new knowledge.

Anne took her sewing down to the screened porch. She had discovered years earlier that whenever life snarled itself up, she had only to sit down with something in her hands, something requiring attention, and gradually, without effort on her part, things would smooth themselves out. So she sat now, her fingers busy with bright orange wool with which she embroidered a blouse for Margaret. Finally she heard Jamie wake, and scramble off in search of his brother.

Then she heard within the house Margaret's voice, clear with delight;

"Father! I didn't know you were coming to-day!"

Anne laid aside her sewing with a secret faint dismay, which she banished instantly. She found Robert in the hall; Margaret, hanging over the banister, drew back at Anne's approach.

"Hello, Anne." Robert kissed the cool cheek Anne offered. "The city was so beastly I came out a day early. Had your swim, Margie? Fine. I want to see that new dive you wrote about."

"I'll wait for you down by the boathouse," said Margaret, and she whisked down the stairs and out of the door.

"Don't let her stay in the water too long, Robert," said Anne. "She seems tired. And bring the boys back when you come."

Anne went slowly back to her sewing. A faint disturbance lingered under her ignoring concentration on the orange stitches.

Dinner was rather silent, in spite of Anne's gentle and insistent talk. Margaret and her father had come in just in time to dress. Margaret had twisted her damp hair on the crown of her head and bound it with a green ribbon. That, with her green linen dress, gave her small pointed face with its winged brows the look of a startled dryad. Anne glanced

at her often; there hung about her a cloud of excitement, like light over water. Once she found Robert, too, eyeing her speculatively.

When Anne came down from Jamie's goodnight she found the porch deserted. Little Robert came back presently, somewhat disconsolate because Dad and Margie were taking a long walk and didn't want him. He sat beside Anne, telling her in his shrill young voice of all he had done since morning. She sent him to bed finally, and at his summons, climbed the stairs to bid him goodnight. As she descended she heard Margaret and her father at the door.

"Good night, Bobs," Margaret was saying. "And you'll tell her? Oh, Bobs!"

"If you'll promise to go straight to sleep and get unstrung a little. Good night, Margie."

Margaret's flight up the stairs carried her past her mother before she saw her.

"Good night, dear," called Anne.

Margaret hesitated, whirled, came back the few steps, lifting her face mutely toward Anne.

"Good night, mother's little girl." Anne kissed her wistfully. "Sleep well." Again at Margaret's hasty withdrawal, she felt that strange fear. But she went calmly down to the porch, where Robert waited.

"Have you time to talk awhile?" he asked abruptly, and she heard in his voice an excitement like Margaret's. He waited until she had settled herself in a low chair, and then dropped opposite her against a pillar. He lighted a cigar, the light glowing within his fingers.

"Are you very tired this week?" she asked.

"Nothing unusual," he dismissed her inquiry briskly. "I want to talk about Margaret."

Had the child gone to her father, tale-bearing! That would be unendurable.

"She's been telling me things—" Robert paused.

"She didn't tell you about her letters?" Anne spoke with frigid scorn.

"Letters? No."

"Well?" Anne waited, the autumn dusk wrapping her in outward tranquillity.

"The beginning, I suppose, is a call I had last week. I thought I wouldn't write about it. A Miss Innsmere came into the office one day. She was at this camp where you sent Margaret, a dancing teacher. Quite a person, too, I judge, young, vigorous—a Danish girl. She came in about Margaret. Thinks the child has a talent for dancing."

"Why did she go to you?" Anne found it difficult to keep her voice from bristling.

"Because you weren't in town, I suppose. She seemed to think we wouldn't take to the idea, and so she came to talk it over."

"What idea?" Anne's antagonism rippled in her tone.

"Why, of Margaret's dancing. She thinks she ought to study—Margie, I mean. On the side, for a few years. Then she'll know whether it's the thing. And Margie wants to."

"You mean study dancing professionally?"

"Yes."

"Ridiculous! I hope you told her we had our own plans for Margaret."

"Now, wait a minute, Anne. You see, Margaret has been talking to me, too. She wants to do it."

"You haven't encouraged her!"

"I have listened to her, Anne."

"Why hasn't she come to me about this?" Anne shut her hands together in her lap. The letters! They were about this scheme!

"Can't you see? She is afraid you will disapprove. Afraid she can't make you see how much she wishes to try it."

"She knows it is absurd, then, if she is so sure of my disapproval."

"Is it, Anne? Why?"

"A public dancer! That child? Are you mad, Robert?"

"Margaret said to me to-night, and she didn't sound childlike, that she thought she had to dance. She studied last year, you know, at school. She says—and you know how shy she is with words—that it is the only thing she loves. That she can say things she feels and thinks that way.

That she feels as though she had just been waiting until she found this out. We walked down through the Black Firs to-night, and she danced for me, a dance she had made for the trees, she said. Anne, it was the loveliest dream I ever saw!"

Anne was silent. Her hands moved together up to her heart, as if to hold close the edges of a gaping wound. After the grief of the afternoon Margaret had taken her father away to dance for him. Margaret was afraid to come to her.

"You know, Anne," went on Robert eagerly, "I have a strong belief that a desire like that is—well, sort of sacred. That we haven't any business to stand in the way. Don't you think so?"

"She's only a child," said Anne coldly. "She doesn't really know what she wants."

"I'm not so sure. I knew what I wanted earlier than that. Didn't you? I didn't get it." His voice dropped wryly. "That's no reason why Margaret shouldn't."

"Surely, Robert, you don't believe what you are saying—that a child knows better what it needs than its mother—its parents can know?"

"Ah, Anne, we don't know much! If this isn't the right thing, she has plenty of time to find it out." Robert pulled himself to his feet, drew a chair near Anne's, and seated himself. "You think, probably, that I don't appreciate how this makes you feel. Shall I tell you? You are feeling as though a picture you had started to paint suddenly walked off your canvas!"

He puffed strongly at his cigar, and the momentary glow touched into relief his cheekbones and temples, lighted his eyes with a glimmer of their old eagerness. They were Margaret's eyes! The same pointed fold of eyelids, the same dark fire. What had he said? A picture, walking off the canvas—

"I wonder why I said picture," he went on slowly, out of the darkness. "I must have been thinking of that career you might have taken. You chose children instead, and human beings aren't so docile as paint and canvas, are they?"

"Why discuss that?" Anne moved impatiently. "You must admit that I have no interests, no concerns, except the good of the children. That's why I won't consent to this plan. You've been wheedled into it by a strange woman and a child! I—I think it rather unjust of you to encourage Margaret without consulting me."

"Don't be hasty, Anne. There are so many things I'd like to say to-night." He flicked his cigar end over the railing. "You've no idea how much thinking I have done this week. It began after Miss Innsmere's call. Then young Carsdale came in. Remember him? That boy at the university? He has carried through several of the things we started—and more of his own. He was telling me about them. When he left, he grinned at me and said, 'They've got you properly domesticated and successful, haven't they, Duffy?' He was a little shabby in that gilt-edged office where I sit all day."

Anne caught her breath sharply.

"You are suggesting, I suppose, that I am to blame for your—commercialization?" she asked, incredulity in her cool tone.

"I want to show you how I feel about Margie. I know why she is afraid to come to you with her desires. You are indomitable, Anne. You are like the earth itself. No one sees its motion, but no one can stop it and every one is whirled along with it. Sometimes I have known that you chose me—shall we say to father your children for you? Sometimes I have pretended I was a free agent. Sometimes I have been sorry you didn't devour me utterly—the female spider has a neat way with her spouse, you know! I shouldn't say these things now, when it is all too late, except for Margaret. She doesn't want to be eaten. The boys are still too young to mind."

"How can you sit there and say those things!" Anne's voice was thick with whirling rage. "As though I were a monster—"

"Anne, dear, you insist upon misunderstanding me. You have been a very beautiful mother. That I know. I am not blaming you that I am prosperous and respectable instead

of lean and hollow-eyed from wrestling with ideas and schemes. There was at least a motive there. The children did need food and shelter. But Margaret is no longer a baby. She must have what she wants."

Something snapped in Anne, and a terrible grinding pain, a physical anguish seized her. She huddled back in her chair, her hands pressing against her breasts.

"Oh, you can't know!" she cried. "You think I am selfish, devouring! You can't know! Before she was born I dreamed of her—beauty and health and loveliness. And since she was a baby I have watched her, worked to make her what she is. A dancer—in public—You have tried to get her away from me! You have tried—"

"Anne! You know that is a lie! I have been humble enough that she has cared for me. When I saw her dancing to-night I was jealous to frenzy that others might watch that. But if she wishes it, who are we to stand in her way?"

"She doesn't know. She doesn't need to dance—to do anything! I had planned so many things for years to come. Surely if I have made her what she is, I have a right to decide what she shall be!"

"Made her?" Robert sat forward. Anne could see his shoulders hunched against the dim light through the window behind him. "We like to think that, don't we? Instead—I was a tool for you, and you, even you, Anne, were a tool for—what? An obscure drive of peoples behind us, craving embodiment. What have you made about her? When she was born you felt you had created her. What had you done, but wait, wait, while she grew?" He was silent. On the shore below them Anne heard the steady rhythm of the surf, like a great crowd shouting in the distance.

What had she done but wait? But wait? The words slipped into the rhythm of the surf.

"You know—" Robert's voice dropped into a puzzled wonder. "That's what all creative work seems to amount to. You wait. You think you are making something, but you only wait while it grows." Another silence. "I have filled my days so full I had no time for that slow waiting.

Do you see, Anne? We are nothing but the soil—lying fallow under the sun."

Anne sat very still. The dreadful rending within her had ceased, and a heavy, lethargic cessation of pain, like that after child-birth, brooded over her. Incredibly there hung about her a moment of white peace, like that of her old dream, in which she lay in the great windless meadow curving against the sky, part of the waiting soil.

Robert had spoken the truth. Margaret's struggles had been only an inarticulate expression of the same truth. It had been as though the soil tried to drag under its warm darkness a flower, opening above.

Robert rose and stood near her.

"That's all, Anne." She felt his fingers brush her shoulder. "After all, you are an artist. Perhaps you should have chosen otherwise than children for your work."

Anne could not speak. Humility, a strange garment for her, enclosed her.

"It is late. Perhaps to-morrow—after you have slept on it." He pulled his tone back to an ordinary level. "You are cold?" She had shivered under his fingers.

"No. Only stripped." Her laugh trembled into a sob.

"Won't you come in, now?"

"Not yet, please." A moment of hesitating silence, and Robert moved toward the door. "Robert—" Anne found words with cumbersome difficulty. "It may be—that to-morrow I can thank you." She saw him draw his body erect, as though a weight had dropped from him. "Good night."

She sat for a long time, like one who accustoms himself to the thin, clear air of a mountain top. She had reached the plateau from which she could see the winding of the path she had followed. When, at last, she climbed silently to her room, she slept with the exhaustion which follows bodily suffering.

She woke early, lying for a time with her eyes closed. Then she rose, and with a curious feeling of exaltation, as though she prepared herself for a sacrament, she wound her long braids of dark hair about her head and bathed.

She could hear Jamie and little Rob, their tongues clattering in small boy early morning style, but no one else seemed awake. She dressed carefully, choosing a dull blue crepe morning gown that Margaret had always liked. Then she went to Margaret's door, and knocked. After a silent moment she pushed it ajar.

Margaret stirred sleepily, her face flushed and young in a cloud of dusky hair. At the sight of Anne she woke instantly, and the wistful alertness in her eyes wrenched at Anne's poise.

She sat down on the edge of the bed, her hands clasped, her eyes caressing the sweet curve of the child's body beneath the cover.

"Margie, dear," she said, "Father talked over with me your plans—" She saw terror leap in the girl's eyes, but she kept her voice serene. "I shall be glad to have you study dancing. Will you, some day, show me some of your own dances?"

Margaret's eyes widened, and a flame ran into her cheeks.

"Oh!" she cried. "Oh! I thought you wouldn't like it—" She sat up against her pillow. "I must tell you—" a bewildered shame in her face—"that I burned up those letters yesterday. They—they were just about the dancing."

"I am sorry about the letters." Anne's serenity had a tinge of piteousness. "Margaret, can you understand how hard it is to find your baby has grown up? I am sorry."

Margaret brushed away the episode impetuously.

"You really mean that you are glad about the dancing?" Her slim hand moved shyly along the blanket toward her mother. "You are glad?"

The reticent caress winged into Anne's heart.

"Yes," she said steadily. "I wanted to tell you, to begin your day!"

She stood for an instant beside the bed, before she turned to leave. In that instant she had her vision of further waiting; a waiting into which Margaret might, some day, return.



MEN OF THEIR RACE

“Who’s that in the kitchen?”

Jessie bent over the bed, folding down the sheet under the sharp chin. The question buzzed against her ear. She moved along the bed, smoothing the blanket over the quiet feet.

“Some one’s down there,” insisted the old woman. “I can hear a different voice.”

“Walsh, they said his name was.” Jessie drew the small table near the bed. “Dick Walsh. An oldish man.”

“Dick Walsh!” A quiver moved over the dry, wrinkled face, and the eyes under heavy folds of eyelids sharpened with interest. “So he’s back!”

“Does he—” Jessie pushed back the muslin curtains at the window; a flush crept under the moist pallor of her face. “Does he belong to the Walshes up on the hill?”

“He’s Robert’s brother. He belongs to ‘em all right.”

“Robert’s brother! But he’s an old man—”

“Old, is he? I guess he would be, with the life he’s led. What’s he come back for? Robert better send him away. He’s got a start on his farm now. If Sarah Walsh sees what sort of men folks she’s married into—”

“What’s the matter with him?” Jessie felt the cool night breeze push into the room, bending aside the thick, sweetish odor of liniment and oils.

“Matter with him? He’s a Walsh. A drinking, selfish was-

trel. They can't be decent to women or themselves. Men of their race—it's in their blood, handsome fools!"

Jessie stood for a moment at the side of the bed, afraid of the bright little eyes that peered up at her.

"He looks worn out," she said. "He looks old enough to be Mr. Walsh's father."

"I saw you walking down the road with Robert!" The eyelids folded over the malicious gleam. "Dick was a handsome boy, too."

Jessie's heart moved in a wave of fear. Did the old woman mean—anything? She stared at the head on the pillow, a wrinkled mask. An old woman, dying; life retreating within her, as though blood no longer ran through her veins, but was hoarded, a few last drops, in some secret depth. All summer, and the slow days of early autumn, she had lain there, and Jessie had tended her. How could she have any suspicion?

The girl leaned quickly above the lamp on the table and blew it out. As the flame leaped up before it died, she saw the heavy lids lifting.

"Go along and get your walk." The old voice crackled.

"Are you comfortable now, Mrs. Cummins?"

"I'll do, I guess."

At the door Jessie looked back. The small night lamp in the hall blurred the outlines in the room. She did not know whether the old eyes followed her.

But on the stairs she glanced over her shoulder, as if afraid she might see in the shadow malicious gleaming points of light. How foolish she was! That was only a bedridden old woman, querulous or childish or cheerful as the pain determined. What could she know of meetings in the orchard, in the lane which led to the lake? Had a new sense grown in her with the dulling of old senses, so that she sniffed what happened outside her chamber?

"Is that you, Jessie?" That was Ral Cummins, the son.

She stepped to the doorway of the sitting room, pulling on her sweater. Ral and his wife, and this Walsh man; the thick odor of farm boots and pipes and the bright oil lamp.

"Don't you want to come in and set a while?"

Dick Walsh looked like Robert, with the bright, firm life of Robert's face mottled and sagged.

"I'm just going out for a breath of air—" Jessie moved away from the door.

"Night air's bad for pretty faces—" The men chuckled. Jessie heard Ral's wife explaining:

"Jessie Dealey. She's from farther up state. Her father died, and she'd always lived home with him, and so the doctor got her to take care of mother. I couldn't see to her and the house, too."

Then she was out of the house, running down the path to the road, in the cool, impenetrable night. Her feet made little sounds along the graveled road. Slowly the night took shape around her, a great willow tree rustling above her, the contour of the land shouldering against the sky, dropping from the hills near her to a distant pale horizon. Then the orchard, the trees near the wall thrusting their grotesque masses between her and the stars, moving slowly past her; the soft dripping of water overflowing the drinking barrel under the wall. She left the road and climbed up through the orchard, her feet slipping in the grassy ruts of the lane, her heart lifting into swift rhythm. She had said she would not come! That morning, when she had gone out to the postbox for the mail and Robert, driving past, had leaned from his seat to say, "I'll wait for you at the upper wall of the orchard to-night," she had laughed and said, "You'll have to wait a long time!" And through the day, when flashes of his face—fair, lean, his blue eyes demanding, cajoling—had blurred her work, she had set her small full mouth and said, "I won't go!" Now, "I won't stay," she thought desperately. "It can't do any harm to see him—once more—to tell him I won't stay."

A movement in the bushes along the lane startled her; just a bird, with a flutter of protest at her intrusion. She found the gap in the wall and clambered over into the orchard. The cool sweet scent of ripened apples hung about her.

She listened. No sound but the swish and plop of an apple falling. She moved slowly over the irregular ground,

her feet brushing through the coarse grass, until she stood on a little rise of land which dropped gently, clear of trees for some distance. The night was less dark there; she could distinguish clearly the pile of boulders. Robert had not come.

She sat down on one of the smooth rocks, her arms huddled about her knees, her eyes straining into the obscure shadows. Perhaps he wouldn't come. His brother might start home, and meet him on the road. She wished she hadn't seen Dick Walsh. Selfish, drunken wastrel—he had stared at her with eyes like Robert's, except for the grayish folds about them. They would have to be careful—of a man like that. But she would have nothing to be careful of! This was to be the last time she would creep up the lane at night.

And then, to-morrow, if Robert drove past and whispered, "To-night, in the orchard—"

She had tried to think; she would go away, somewhere. But where? If she went, what would become of her? She felt herself in that vague future, torn apart by the teeth of this desire. Why should she go? No one cared what happened to her. She was wicked, wicked! But that was only a word, and to-morrow was a word, cold and impotent against to-night, and her tense, quivering body, where her senses hung, winged, waiting his coming. "Time enough to be good when we're old," Robert had kissed her protest away. "What's wrong in loving?" Old-like Mrs. Cummins. Suppose she went away and grew old—when Robert loved her!

She crouched against the stones at a sound beyond the wall, an apple crunching under a heel. She saw a shadow moving among the shadows of the trees, heard a soft, staccato whistle. She might crawl away and hide! But the shadow grew tangible above her, and with a low, triumphant, "Jessie!" laid strong, warm hands on her shoulders, and drew her up against a heart as mad as her own.

Nothing else in the night but his intense, seeking kiss, the enclosing pressure of his arms. He released her suddenly.

"Sorry you came?" His face was so near Jessie caught

the gleam of his strong, even teeth. "Let's sit down. I can't stay but a minute to-night." He pulled her down on the rocks, his arm over her shoulders. "Dick—that's my brother—is around. He—well, I don't want him gettting wise to this." His fingers pushed under the sweater cuff, moved gently over her soft arm. But Jessie shivered, the sweet languor gone. Was it Dick who held her there in the dark? The same stocky shoulders, firm chin, broad forehead. "Happy, Jessie?" Robert rubbed his cheek against hers, in a swift, rough caress.

"Happy!" Something snapped in Jessie, letting her down, down. She huddled away from Robert, and suddenly she was crying in little rasping sobs. "Oh, I wisht I was dead! I wisht I was dead!"

"Why, Jessie!" The man made a startled movement of withdrawal. "What's the matter? What—" He seized her hands. "Has somebody found out about us?" He was hostile, threatening, leaning toward her.

"No, no. I wish they had. Then they'd do something. I can't stand it."

"Well, what's the trouble, then?" His voice had relief in his tone. "Don't cry—"

"What's to become of me?" Jessie strangled on a sob. "I can't sleep, nights, any more—trying to think what to do."

"Now, see here!" Robert pulled her back into his arms and lifted her face, the rough tips of his fingers firm under her chin. "You said you wouldn't fuss any more, didn't you? What good does it do, eh? Here you are, spoiling the little time we had to-night. Don't you want me loving you any more?"

Jessie's body resisted his arms.

"That's why—" she whispered. "I ought to go away, and I can't." She went limp into his close grasp. "Robert, help me! You got me to loving you—"

"Well, that's all right, isn't it? Nothing's any different. You women folks are all alike. Can't have any fun without starting to spoil things. What you want to go away for? Making me feel bad! I guess you're kinda tired. Old lady Cummins been working you hard? Making you pull a

long face about me? You're too soft and sweet. Let the old folks worry. Time enough for that some day. There's a girl! Kiss me, little Jessie."

But for once the whirl of passion under his lips failed to catch Jessie. It was a careless wind on the surface, and she lay beneath in the deep water of misery.

"There!" Jessie felt his laugh, as it lifted his breast and loosened his arms, like a blow on her quiescent body.

"Damn Dick anyhow! He'll be back at the house. I've got to go along." He stood beside her, his shadow strong, sure of outline. "To-morrow, Jessie? I'll get away early. You'll be my sweet girl again?"

When Jessie could no longer hear his quiet, steady steps down the lane she flung herself on the grass, one arm doubled under her head. She could see Robert climbing the long hill to his farm, turning in under the great walnut tree, pushing open the door off the side porch. His wife would be sitting there; Jessie had seen her once, a small, dark woman. Perhaps Dick would be there, at the other side of the table, looking up at Robert's entrance with a leer at the back of his eyes.

Swiftly, under her burning eyelids, moved the summer; not so much in images as in the texture of her whole consciousness—flesh, nerves, speeding blood. The day in early summer; she had climbed through the stagnant heat of the valley up to a hill pasture, into the little breeze from the distant river which wavered from hill-top to hill-top, above the heat. She had closed her eyes and flung her arms back of her head, against the tree, to feel the breeze touch her moist throat. She had opened them straight into Robert's gay blue eyes. He had come up from the lake in the woods, his hair still damp from his swim. He knew her name, had seen her down the hill; he had talked—what had he said? She remembered only the new, unbidden thrill under that bold, bright glance of his.

She dreamed of him that night. She had not known his name.

Then she waited to see him again. The memory of those days of waiting—hot, still breathless days; like the trees,

held in every leaf in rich quiet, until a sudden summer wind rushed into the valley from the river, whipping branches and leaves into riot.

She had been sent on an errand for Mrs. Cummins, to the Walsh farm. She had knocked, and then in the room darkened by vines over the window, had seen a woman sitting by the table. She was shelling peas, and in the dim light her hands, the small oval of her face, seemed to have borrowed pale green light, like water. "You'll have to ask Mr. Walsh," she had said. "He's somewhere back of the house."

Jessie had gone slowly, being tired, past the barns and poultry yard; she saw the horses first, square heavy bodies and patient necks. Then—ah, the wind rushing at the leaves! —the man, tugging the great leather collar over the head of the gray horse. He had seen her, had dropped the collar and come toward her, with his arrogant, quick stride, his eyes very blue in his sun-burned face. "Hello!" he had called. "Come to see me?" She could feel in her nostrils again, instead of the faint smell of the grass she pressed against, the odor of soil and sun-warmed leather on his hands. She had withdrawn in frightened hostility from his laughing, demanding stare, had given him her message and fled.

The days that followed ached within her; the old woman fretting at her in the heat; sharpened grief for the safe uneventful days with her father before his death; sudden waking in the night, to twist and turn, her hands pressed against her body to stop the dull, frightening throbbing.

She had put Robert out of her thoughts, ashamed of those days of waiting. If, in the unquested dreams of day or night, she found herself tormented by bright, dominant eyes, what could she do!

Then one day, as she had walked from the village along the dusty road, he had overtaken her, had stopped his car, and offered her, in ordinary neighbor fashion, a ride.

If she had gone away that night!

She sat up, breathing heavily; her hand pushed at the rough stones. She was being torn apart in separate quivering memories. The weeks since that day she walked in a warm, dark dream, all thought and volition gone from her. That

was wickedness. "What's the harm?" Robert had said. "You're lonesome, I'm lonesome. Why not be happy?"

But thought had come again, gnawing at the edges of her dream. Robert wouldn't listen. Then—when was it—two days ago? Old Mrs. Cummins had said, "How's Sarah Walsh? Why don't she come to see me?" Mary, her daughter-in-law, had answered sharply, "You know, mother! She can't get out."

"Why not?" the old woman had insisted.

"Have you forgotten? She's—expecting. She's had a bad summer."

That was all. But it had corroded the dream, eating out all the ecstasy, all the sweetness, leaving only tortured fear.

Robert—she heard the old woman's thin voice. "Wastrels. Can't be decent to women or themselves. The Walsh blood."

That first time he had kissed her, and she had struggled to escape her great need for submission to his love. He had answered her protest, "Sarah?" and sneered. "You needn't worry about her. She hates me. She's done with me. She doesn't even see me any more."

She couldn't talk to Robert. He laughed at her. If she insisted—she knew how anger sucked the light out of his face, leaving it hard, like a great eagle, with its arched, prominent nose and straight mouth. But a child! His! Revulsion swept through her in waves of nausea. She hated him!

Suddenly she was afraid of the night with its soft sounds in trees and grass. She stumbled to her feet and ran, sobbing as her sweater caught on the brambles near the wall, through the dark lane between crouching shadows of the bushes, out to the gray road.

Not until she had crept into bed, in her cot in the corner of old Mrs. Cummins' room, did the frantic beating of her heart stop. The room was full of the harsh, irregular breathing of the old woman. She held her own breath, listening. Some night, that room would be still, free of that difficult slow sound. Ah, if she could die, as easily as that old woman! If she held her breath long enough—she gasped,

turning against her pillow to stifle the sound. She didn't want to die! Going away, alone; worse than death. If Robert loved her, hadn't she a right to stay? Right? No, it was wrong, everything. No one, anywhere, to help her.

The next morning came. Jessie moved about at her tasks, listless, dull. The emotions of the night clung, batlike, far above her, waiting for the dark again. She had, finally, carried down the breakfast tray, righted the room, adjusted an extra pillow under Mrs. Cummins' head, and drawn the curtain so that she could look out across the valley, which lay in purple haze. Ral came to the door, hearty, good-natured.

"Well, ma, feeling pretty smart? Want to help me pick apples?"

"F you hold the ladder!" she chuckled. "Picking apples? I want some apples to send up to Sarah Walsh. You leave 'em on the steps, and Jessie'll run up with them."

He had clumped down the stairs, and Jessie flinched under the old woman's blinking gaze.

"Twon't take you long to run up there. Mis' Walsh'll be glad to see you. She don't get out much."

"I was going to rinse out that blanket for you." Jessie opened the door of the closet; she wanted a shield between her and the old woman.

"Tisn't a good drying day. Too misting. And it won't take you long. Just up the hill."

She couldn't go to that house. Her flesh crawled at the fuzzy texture of wrapper with which her hands fumbled. She couldn't say, "I won't go!" Mrs. Cummins waited. Waited to hear her protest, perhaps. What had the old eyes seen!

"You're looking kind of peaked," the thin voice went on. Jessie stood in the doorway. "Walk'll do you good. You like lots of air—sometimes."

Jessie whirled, but her anger drooped, powerless against that puckering smile on the wrinkled face. She went down through the empty house. Ral's wife was helping gather the apples. On the rear porch Ral had left them, a tin pail full.

Jessie stooped, and the red of the apples vanished in racing blackness. She lifted the pail, and in an instant the blackness had gone, leaving a world strangely green. She thought: if Mrs. Cummins knew about me, she would just send me away. She doesn't know. It's just her way.

But she crawled up the hill, fear at her heels, fear lying in wait at the end of her journey. Robert wouldn't be there; surely he would be at work. She could leave the apples on the step, and say no one was home. But Mrs. Cummins knew Sarah was home. Always home, now.

She turned in at the drive. Fine chips under her feet, white, fresh splinters. Robert had cut his kindling there. A pile of dry brown vines near the step; winter beans, not yet picked over. Homely things, part of his days, in which she had no share. She knocked, and the sound thundered at her. Then she heard, from the pasture above the house, Robert's shout: "Dick! Oh, Dick!" and an answer, "Right-o. Coming!"

The door opened. Jessie saw, first, the quick contraction of the white forearm, as though it braced the whole body; her eyes darted to the face of the woman, Sarah, Robert's wife—dark eyes staring, lips parted in a sudden breath.

"Mrs. Cummins sent these to you." Jessie set down the pail and stepped back.

"Will you come in?" Sarah asked, slowly.

"I have to get back to work." Jessie felt that dark intent gaze hold her. Within her began a desperate fluttering, a beating against nets spread to capture her.

"No. Come in. I want you to come in."

Jessie stepped over the threshold, her eyes bright with panic. The kitchen was full of light; the fall wind had torn the leaves from the vines over the window, and through the haze the pale sun made splotches on the white oil-cloth of the table, on the yellow worn floor, on Sarah's blue apron.

"Won't* you sit down? I'll get another chair." Sarah crossed the room, her small head lifted.

Jessie hated her. Robert's wife, heavy with child—his

child—moving with that slow pride. She glanced about her furtively; she could escape, even now. On a nail behind the door hung a rough gray coat, Robert's. The girl's soft mouth trembled, and her hands twisted together. Sarah came back, dragging her chair; about her movements an ominous deliberateness. Jessie felt fear crawling in her muscles. She thought: I must be getting crazy, suspecting everybody.

Sarah leaned forward, resting her arms on the table; thin, white arms, purple veined in the hollows of the elbows.

"It's queer you should come in this morning," she said, finally. Then she was silent again.

"She's not pretty," thought Jessie. "Ugly, with those shadows under her great eyes!"

"Did you know—" Sarah's smiling lips, under her somber eyes, were sinister. "Did you know Robert left you last night for a little red-haired clerk in the village?"

"Oh, no! No!" Jessie's cry crashed back against her own ears. The woman had laid a trap, had caught her! She huddled into her chair, her face distorted.

"Did you think he would be more faithful to you than to me?"

Jessie's fingers clutched at her chair; she wanted to hurl herself at that pale face, to tear down the fine dark coils of hair, to beat the lie off those crooked lips. It wasn't true! The woman was baiting her, trying to find out. Warily she spoke.

"What do you mean, saying that to me?"

"Perhaps—" the long fingers moved on the table—"perhaps you have felt bad. You don't look so fresh and unthinking as you did in the summer. And you've been bothering him—" Her soft voice burrowed at the roots of Jessie's anger. "So he went hunting, for another pretty face—"

Cold sweat on her temples, on the palms of her hands; something strangling her. Robert, striding off down the lane in the dark—a red-haired girl!

"Now you know how I felt!"

Jessie lurched forward in her chair, trying to get up, to escape. But her knees crumpled under her.

"No, you mustn't go. I had to see you. I wondered what sort of woman you were. You're just a little soft thing, aren't you?"

"Oh, let me go!" Jessie cried out. "Or kill me, if you want to! I wish I was dead."

"I did want to. You and him both." A shudder trembled down to the tips of Sarah's fingers. "But that was—at first."

"You've known—all this time—and kept still—"

"I meant to go away. But I was sick." On Sarah's face had come an inscrutable pale glow, like candle flame under a hand.

"I didn't want to love him. I tried not to. I couldn't seem to stop. There wasn't anything to hang on to keep from it. I didn't know you were—with child." In some way that light on Sarah's face devoured her, ate its way into her vitals. Unless she could explain, could justify herself, she would go always with that agony of humiliation within her. "I thought he loved me. And I wasn't taking anything that was yours—if it was me he loved. He said you hated him. Oh, curse me! Spit on me! Don't sit there—when I found out you were to have a child, I wanted just to die."

Sarah lifted her head, the column of her throat tense.

"Why? What difference did that make—to you?" Then swiftly, "You loved him that much? That was a lie I told you. About the girl. I wanted you to suffer, too."

"He didn't go—" Jessie's hand doubled against her mouth, pulling it sidewise.

"But it would be true, some day, soon. Before you there was another woman. She sent him packing, though. She wanted a man of her own."

"It's between just you and me." Jessie's hand moved down to her breast. "You're keeping him—when he doesn't love you nor you him."

"It's more than that." Sarah extended her arm along the table. "I thought that, up till a little while ago. I planned to go away. To leave him to you and the others. Oh, there would be others. You believed he had gone, didn't you? I

thought you must be wanton, cruel, but you aren't. You're only—" Her hand dropped open on the white cloth.

Jessie shivered under the black, dilated eyes; something in them beating her down into nothingness.

"You love him, and so—" Sarah drew her arms slowly from the table, clasped them about her knees; she turned her head toward the window. Her drooping back, the curve of shoulders and extended arms, made of her heavy body a single gesture, silence, sheltering and waiting. The woman had withdrawn into remote sanctuary. Jessie was afraid; the calm white brow, the drooping neck with the coiled dark hair against the pale skin, had become unavailable.

"You saw his brother, Dick. He spoke of you. Spent, sodden, wasted. His wife, the first one, divorced him. And the rest of his women— There was another brother. And his father. They kill themselves with women and drink." Sarah's words came softly.

Behind them Jessie heard the old woman's shrill, "Men of their race." As though Sarah, too, heard it, her soft words went on:

"Have they told you about old Mrs. Cummins? People round here have almost forgotten, but she hasn't. That's why she's noticed you and Robert. She was going to marry his uncle. Another Robert Walsh. Just before the wedding she threw him over. Something about another girl. She hates the Walsh men. She's waiting to see Robert go the same way."

That old woman, with a hate left from her youth!

"Fine lovers, never growing into men. Always the same story, their women suffering, hating them, forgiving them, leaving them." She turned her face toward Jessie again. "And yet there's something else in them. Robert told you I hated him. I have—this summer. But at first, last spring, it was only that I was sick. When I knew I was pregnant, I had to be alone. I didn't want him. He didn't like that. He was jealous—and he didn't know what he was jealous of. So he went off." She dropped into silence again. Then, "But the child is in my womb—you will know, some day,

how that quickening makes you not a woman—groveling with beasts before men began—yet reaching up and up. Not one woman, but more."

Jessie swayed forward in her chair. The strange words delved within her, disturbing memories faint, terrible, intangible, memories not her own.

"I had thought I would go away with my child. I could bear it alone and care for it. Then I saw Robert and his father and men back of them, slipping back generation after generation, never going ahead. Robert is part of my child. If he slips back—oh, do you see?"

Hot tears falling now on Jessie's face, on her clenched hands.

"Last night I felt my child move, felt it under my hand. I thought, perhaps men, never feeling that—slip back more easily. Then I saw clearly, almost like a vision. Love, real love, has to conceive in them. Not flesh growing in flesh. But out of me, if I could love him enough, would come fruit. No child. The man himself!" Sarah paused, her eyes contracting, as though she returned from secret places and saw Jessie again. "I wanted to see you. I wondered—perhaps you could do that for him—better than I. Could you?"

Jessie's hand pressed against her soft body, against the treacherous desires which racked her. Suppose she said yes! Would this unreal woman go away, leaving Robert—for her? What then? He wouldn't stay. She knew. He wore his love for her lightly, a careless outer garment; he would doff it as lightly. She scarcely understood Sarah's words, but slowly out of them rose a great fog, dissolving the room in which she sat, obscuring her own pain. A fog full of dim figures. Figures moving with abandon along precipitous paths. Stretching back beyond time. Slipping, clinging with bleeding fingers to the rocks. Below them monstrous shapes in slow, rhythmic motion; monstrous tentacles weaving sluggishly up from the abyss. One figure nearer than the rest, turning his face, strong eagle's face, distorted as he flung his arms high, reeling at the edge.

Jessie plunged to her feet, her hands beating before her

eyes, fighting at the fog. The room settled around her. She saw again Sarah's dark, brooding eyes. Had Sarah thrown her vision out around her?

"You can't change him!" She thrust the words out in a last, desperate cry. "He's what he is!"

Sarah rose, leaning against the table.

"Yes," she said. "What is he?"

Then Jessie retreated, step by step, until she felt her hand touch the door behind her.

"I'll go away." Her whisper implored Sarah, begged against that light in the woman's face, a light not human, and yet brought up from the slow, warm source of life itself. "I'm going."

Through the open door, cutting the soft air, came Robert's voice shouting at his horses. Jessie hung taut for an instant, listening. Then, blindly, she ran down the steps across the grass to the road.

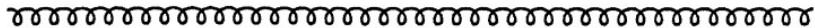
The steep hill dropped beneath her as she ran, as though the earth turned swiftly from her. If she stumbled and fell, she would be hurled over its rim into space! The wind was cold on her wet cheeks. Round a curve, gasping softly, she saw the pointed roof of the Cummins house, and slackened her flight.

She went more slowly past the orchard. Voices among the trees. They were still gathering the apples. Only a little time ago she had climbed the hill. Summer was over; they were gathering the harvest. She stood at the door of the house. In that upper room the old woman lay, waiting. She had known, all these weeks. She had told Sarah. Her hate had sharpened her eyes. Jessie shivered; she herself had been to Mrs. Cummins only another instrument of wrath against the race of Walshes. And now, when she entered the room, that dry smile would splinter into words, harsh, bitter words.

She must go up to her and say, "I am going away." Her shoulders drooping in humility, as though the old woman's words already beat upon her, she climbed the stairs and pushed open the door.

In the still room the old woman lay, her face toward the window, where the valley's haze had lightened into misty blue. Her secret, hostile smile was gone, and in its place, an immobile, placid stare under half closed eyes.

Unquestioned now, Jessie could go.



A RELUCTANT HERO

"Aw, GEE! Don't I go to school all day? 'S'nough, without studyin' all night, I should think!"

"Look at your report-card! You open that book, Henry, and get to work."

Mr. Potts peered out from his paper at the two—his son, sandy cropped head sulking behind a red "Fifth Reader"; Mrs. Potts, returning to her sewing, a sort of pyramidal calm over her wide forehead and broad bosom. He ducked as his wife's eyes lifted from the stocking she was darning. For a few minutes there was silence around the red-clothed table, a silence punctuated by hoarse breathings of words from Henry. Then the boy clapped the book on the table.

"There! Read their old bunk. All about a he-ro. Po'try, that's all it is."

"Did you read it through?" Mrs. Potts pursed her lips at Henry's nod. "Then you go on to bed."

"What hero was it?" Mr. Potts laid down his paper.

"A guy standin' on a bridge and killin' everybody."

Henry hitched slowly away, under his mother's impelling gaze.

"Not Horatius!" Mr. Potts slipped his feet under the table, shoving his chair toward the book.

"Say, you know him, too?" Henry grinned wisely. "It's all old bunk they give us. I'd just as lief read some good stuff—"

"Henry, it's learning to read, not what you read." Mrs. Potts rolled the stockings into a firm ball. "Go on to bed. It's late." As the boy shuffled out of the room, she frowned at her husband. "I got all that ironing to do to-morrow. Don't you begin that book now. There's the stoves to see to."

With a pucker between his blue eyes, Mr. Potts stepped into his slippers and went out through the neat kitchen to the coal-shed. When he came back with the scuttle, his wife's voice assailed him from the bedroom:

"Put newspapers down for the ashes. You spilled them all over last night."

When he had shaken the stove, let the coals rattle in, and checked it, he gathered up the paper he had spread, blowing at a little heap of ashes that trickled from a corner, and carried the empty scuttle back to the shed. He locked the doors, and tiptoed to the table to turn down the lamp. With a glance toward the door, he touched the book. Moistening a finger, he ran through the pages. There it was—Horatius at the Bridge! He curled one foot up around a thin leg and balanced there, swaying a little, forming the words with his lips. But the dauntless Horatius was interrupted midway by:

"Henry! Put down that book and come to bed! I've got to get some sleep."

His eyes seizing the next line, Henry Potts puffed out the lamp and felt his way to the door. A slight flush appeared at the edges of his sandy mustache at his wife's, "If you paid half as much heed to business as you do to heroes and such, you'd be something more'n a clerk in Baxter's to-day." But he said nothing, and presently lay in the darkness, his arm twitching with the blows of Horatius's sword.

The next morning Mr. Potts carried in several extra armfuls of wood for the ironing. Since Henry had built up his morning-paper route his father somehow fell heir to the house chores. When Mr. Potts had filled the box, brushed the light snow off the front walk, and left a scuttle of coal by the dining-room stove, he wound his muffler around his neck and struggled into his overcoat. Mrs. Potts, clattering

the breakfast-dishes out of the way, stopped to brush a thread from the worn sleeve.

"You'd ought to have a new coat, Henry," she accused him.

"Soon be spring." Mr. Potts pulled on his mittens. "Got that insurance to meet next month."

"It's always something." She vanished into the kitchen, Mr. Potts staring after her.

"I'd just as soon make more money if I knew how," he mumbled.

"Huh? what'd you say?" She stood in the door, polishing a tumbler with swift vigor.

"Did you want anything over town?" He edged toward the door.

"That pound of hamburg I told you to bring. If you see Henry coasting on that hill this noon, you bring him home with you. I don't want he should coast there."

Mr. Potts plunged his hands in his pockets and stepped out into the crisp morning. He hurried gingerly along the icy street, stopping once to watch a red-capped boy streak past, "belly-bump," from the crest of the hill a block above down to the village square below. Mrs. Potts was right; that was a dangerous hill, curving into the main street at its foot like that. He smiled as he picked his way along. The town would have to sprinkle ashes there; take more'n a mother to keep a boy off such a coast!

The cold tickled his nostrils as he crossed at the foot of the hill and turned into the sweep of north wind down the main street. He was glad Baxter's was just three doors up, next the grocery. On the windows the frost was so thick he could scarcely see the goods he had arranged there Monday. He closed the front door carefully behind him, hung his coat in the corner, and, rubbing his palms together, squinted up the aisle. It was pleasant, alone in the store. Until Mr. Baxter came in, toward noon, he could almost think it was his own business—as Mrs. Potts said it ought to be. He sighed; he couldn't get her to understand how the trolley-line to the city had dulled trade—a man had to have money—

With a clap of his hands he reached for the broom, and marched up the aisle behind a cloud of dust.

Later that morning, as Mr. Potts knelt by a wooden box, checking off goods as he unpacked them, he stopped counting to stare at the label on the "Extra heavy men's shirts." "Dragon Brand," it read.

"Them old heroes had it easy," he exclaimed. "Killing dragons is nothing! Fighting with a sword!" He brought his fist down on his knee with such force that he lost his balance, and broke his pencil on the edge of the box. He scrambled to his feet, fumbling for a jack-knife. "Always spoiling something, ain't I?" he asked of the pencil as he whittled it down. The rest of the morning he held himself rigorously to the glorious business of selling thread and oil-cloth and one apron, and of settling the new stock in place on the shelves.

That noon Mr. Baxter was later than usual. When Henry saw him at the door, wiping the frost rime from his beard, he bolted for his coat. Mrs. Potts liked dinner on the dot. Buttoning the coat, he hurried up the street, empty except for the few teams huddled under blankets along the park railing across from the stores. Half-way up the hill he stopped, catching a long, tingling breath, and peering out at the mob of boys that went shouting up the road, dragging a line of bobs. Mrs. Potts had said something about bringing Henry home; he didn't seem to be in that bunch. She had said something else; as he caught the tail of that fleeting recollection, he wheeled in dismay and started at a trot back down the hill. A pound of hamburg! It was lucky he had remembered it at all!

From the crest of the hill came the warning shout of the boys. He squinted up at them as he crossed the street. Two bobs abreast, a line of them; the hill was a living boy-avalanche. Then behind him came the honk-honk of a heavy motor-truck which had skidded too near a team of horses. There was a scream from some one, a clattering and wrenching as the horses leaped back, and then a rush straight for the corner, frightened nostrils and pounding hoofs making a world of confusion all about Henry Potts for a terrifying

second—and those boys flying into it! He flung up one hand with a curious noise in his throat, a staggering “Huh-huh—” and jumped to catch at something, and dangle, toward the ditch—

Henry Potts floated slowly toward a thing stretched under a white counter-pane. He must crawl back into that. Slowly, slowly—a grinding of horrible wheels, a clutching of the agony at the very heart of life—Ah! That was better, that numbness. He was in again. Words ran over him.

“Quickly, Mrs. Potts. I think he’s coming to. He may live only a minute.”

Then a hush again, a hush into which he felt presently that he must look, if he could lift those leaden eyelids.

“Why, Maria!” He had never seen his wife’s face so white, with such red eyes. She stared a moment, and with a “Henry!” slumped down to her knees beside the bed. He would have touched her head, but something held his hands rigid. Was there some one else behind him? The doctor, stepping forward to bend over his chest.

“Guess I done something to it—” Then he remembered suddenly that world of madness into which he had hurled himself. “Did the boys get hurt?” he whispered.

Mrs. Potts pulled herself up, her round cheeks quivering.

“Not a boy, Henry,” the doctor said, slowly. “You did a wonderful thing—steering those horses off; the boys swept past—safe.”

“It’s night, eh?” Henry stared at the lamp on the wash-stand. “What’s wrong with me? I ain’t dying, am I? I can’t seem to move.”

The doctor pulled a chair near the bed and sat there, shading his eyes with one hand. “The horses caught you. Paralysis. You are the town’s hero, Henry. And you have given your life.”

“Me? A hero!” Henry’s eyes grew startlingly blue in his gray face. “Pshaw! Maria, don’t cry. ’S all right. If I’m going, we’d ought to see to things—”

“It ain’t pshaw! It’s true!” The color spread from Maria’s eyelids over her face. “Everybody’s been here. Fathers and

mothers, the minister—everybody. They say—there ain’t a man could of been so brave—not waiting a second—”

“Anybody would of done it.” But a strange light shone out through the blue eyes. “I ain’t leaving you much. The house—and that insurance—”

“And the memory of his father as a great hero! What more can a man leave?” The doctor rose. “If I could do as much for my boy—” He walked heavily across the room, Henry’s eyes following him.

“Henry, I didn’t mean to plague you, over the books.” Maria bent over him awkwardly. “I didn’t know—”

“That’s all right.” Henry listened to the doctor’s voice out in the next room.

“Henry, come here. Your father has regained consciousness.”

Then a small, sandy-haired boy, with frightened eyes, came reluctantly to the side of the bed.

“Well, old fellow! Take care of your mother, eh?”

“Kiss your father,” whispered Maria, and Henry pecked at the quiet face, and disappeared out of the reach of his father’s eyes.

“I’ll give him this opiate, Mrs. Potts, so he won’t suffer.” The doctor bent over the rigid figure. “Some of the women will stay with you. There’s nothing I can do.”

The heavy lids shut down; Henry could not pry them open. Voices floated past him. Some one was saying—the minister that voice belonged to—“Mrs. Potts, let the beauty of the deed help you bear your burden. We have been talking it over”—here the voice fell until Henry could scarcely follow—“A public funeral, Sunday, from the church—All the townspeople—honor—” Then off and off the voices drifted, thinner, and thinner, until there was only black silence.

After an eon, within that black silence rested a small kernel of life. It pricked and stirred, swelled into Henry Potts, hero! Slowly he lifted those eyelids, into which all the weight of his body had gathered, and saw across the white counterpane a thin streak of winter sunshine. A woman

nodding by the bed gave a little cry; several women hurried into the room.

"Such a start as it gave me!" whispered the first. She laid her hand on the bed, a plump hand with skin tight over the knuckles. "Mr. Potts—my boy was there—on the first bob—" She slipped aside as the doctor hung over the still figure.

"Astonishing vitality!" He nodded over his shoulder, and Henry, lifting his eyes, saw his wife, her hair straggling about her face in desperate untidiness.

"Make Maria lie down and rest." The terror in her eyes disturbed him. "I'll have them call you."

Some one whispered to the doctor, who turned again to look at Henry.

"It can't harm him. There's a reporter out there, Henry," he said, gravely. "He wants to make a big story about you—"

The tall youth who came in then peered at Henry through shell spectacles. "Proud to know you, Mr. Potts. We want to make a front-page story. Just a point or two. What did you think as you jumped for the rein?"

"Didn't think." Henry's smile was apologetic. "Anybody would of done it." But his eyes, as they followed the young man until he disappeared out of their narrow radius, were eager. What was he saying, there in the hall? "I'll call up the drug-store, then, the last minute. His death ought to be part of the story, of course." It would be nice to wait long enough to see that paper. On that thought he dozed off. When he opened his eyes again, he found Maria sitting by his side, her hands rigid in her lap. She leaned toward him.

"You—are there, yet?" Her chin quivered. "The minister's been here all morning. He had to go— He wanted to tell you—" The muscles of her face contracted spasmodically. "It's awful—me sitting here tellin' you—"

"There, Maria! It's nice to hang on long enough to hear about it."

"They're raising a monument subscription for you. Ed Collins started it. His two boys was there. They want to know what you want on it. A sort of motto—"

* "A monument!" Henry closed his eyes and opened them

quickly. Maria still sat there, watching him with troubled awe. The monument was scarcely more wonderful than that expression on her face.

"Tellin' what you did—"

"No. Nothin' but my name. Henry Potts. It wasn't nothing—what I did."

"Henry!" She leaned over him, tears running from her contracted eyelids, and kissed him; then rushed out of the room. Her tears were warm on Henry's cheek. Wishing that some one would wipe them off, he drifted into sleep again.

Later he came floating back. Except for regular breathing somewhere near his bed, the house was quiet; the whispering movement that had filled it earlier in the day had fallen into waiting silence. Night again; the lamp was turned too low; he didn't like that smoky smell. Something tickled his cheek, and he opened his eyes. Above him hovered little Miss Briggs, the end of the gray fascinator about her throat brushing his face.

"Will I call your wife? She's lying down a bit?"

"No. I'm all right." Henry smiled gently. That was her professional tone; she "sat up" with the sick of the village. "No. Miss Briggs—" Henry hesitated. "Was the piece in the paper about it?"

"Two columns on the front sheet!" She straightened her wiry body. "Maria took it up-stairs, but I remember the last sentence. It was beautiful. 'The eyes of the nation are on that darkened room where lies the man who has met the supreme test of his manhood.' Then there was something about all fathers and mothers honoring you—"

"Anybody would of done it." Henry watched for the quick jerk of Miss Briggs's gray head.

"You was the one," she said. "You sure you don't want me to call Maria?"

"Not now."

She settled herself in her chair, pulling her shawl about her neck.

"The eyes of the nation." The words wrapped Henry Potts in a warm glory, within which his thoughts gathered slowly. He was the one, he, Henry Potts. They all knew he

had done it. A public funeral Sunday! Henry saw the townspeople crowding solemnly into the church, almost smelled the flowers banked under the old oak pulpit. But he had to die to go to that funeral. That was the only difficult part, dying before you gathered the joy of your deed. Horatius hadn't died, though. He sighed, and then frowned at Miss Briggs's questioning flutter. A monument, too! He had shown folks, at last. Even Maria! It wasn't much, what he had done. But folks knew him, now. Not Henry Potts, clerk at Baxter's. Henry Potts on a monument! A man! Close about him settled the glory, a shining sphere within which he rested.

When, in the early morning, Doctor Washburn tiptoed in, the wrinkles on his face deepened curiously at Henry's quiet smile.

"You're a miracle, Henry." He shook his head. "I gave you an hour—"

Henry heard him, as he pulled on his coat in the hall, talking with Mrs. Potts. They'd better have Baker, the city specialist.

All day, through the door he asked them to leave open, Henry heard the people of the town come in with solemn queries, depart with whispered amazement. Henry Junior's puzzled face stared in once and was whisked away. Remote, smiling, Henry Potts listened. That smile reflected dimly the bubble of light that inclosed him, a bubble swelling, brightening steadily.

After the specialist had gone, Henry heard the minister again. "So he may linger indefinitely? Hm. Then we can't go ahead with the arrangements for the funeral. I'll have to change my sermon." And Miss Briggs's sharp voice—was it a trifle sorrowful?—"The roses in this 'Gates Ajar' won't keep, and I don't suppose the florist would take it back now." Then the voices moved out into the dining-room, blurring together.

Saturday, Sunday, Monday Henry Potts slept peacefully, woke with his faint smile, listened to the stirring of people in the house. The newspaper was propped on the wash-stand, folded so that his eyes could catch the headlines.

Tuesday Maria sent Henry back to school; she couldn't keep him quiet any longer, and as there was no telling—Saturday she dragged an old couch in to the foot of the bed. "I might as well sleep here," she explained, "instead of paying Miss Briggs."

"You ain't working too hard?" Henry's eyes lost their light as they rested on her face, sagging into yellowish folds.

"Work! I don't mind work!" She stumbled abruptly from the room.

That choking sound—was that a sob? Then the light shone out again in Henry's eyes; some one was knocking at the rear door, some one to ask again how the hero lingered. His warm glow wrapped him securely. For a moment he wondered about Maria; she wasn't having an easy time. But he gave up the wondering easily. He had sloughed off that drab Henry Potts, husband. Another moment, now, and everything would be over; she would have a proud memory and comfortable living.

Early the next week the doctor urged her to have a nurse come in. She refused stubbornly, and Henry made no insistence. His needs seemed trivial, few—interruptions, most of them, to the weaving of his brilliant dreams. That same day, as she drew a fresh sheet over him, Henry asked her how many people had been in that morning. "They don't seem to come—so much—" he finished, a little fearfully.

"The children ask Henry at school," Maria explained, her hands jerking at the sheet.

"I hadn't thought of that." Henry smiled. "Of course."

The next noon the boy burst into the house with strident voice. Henry heard Maria hush him quickly, and then a door shut off the rest. He asked her about it when she came in with a bowl of broth, but she would say only: "Nothing but some talk. Don't bother."

The following day she came into his room with reluctant determination, and sat down heavily by the bed. "I don't suppose I'd ought to bother you—lying here helpless—but I don't know where to turn."

Something in her tone racked through the shining sphere to Henry, far within.

"It's money," she said. "That insurance. It's due next week. I had to take what we'd saved toward it—that specialist—and all—"

"Next week!" Henry sucked in his cheeks, with their ragged growth of sandy beard. "I clean forgot."

"Mr. Baxter sent your wages down that first week, but he's got a new man now. I don't know who to ask. We've always got along respectable. There's Henry's paper route—but that don't pay the grocer bill, let alone the doctor or the rest."

"I clean forgot," repeated Henry. It was an echo of a former life, an old humiliation, trying to seize him again.

"If I knew where to turn, I wouldn't of bothered you. But that insurance—if that goes, where'll we be?" Mrs. Potts stared at Henry, her eyelids reddening. "I thought you'd have to know about it—"

"I'd ought to think about it." Henry's eyes left her face, traveled to the streak of winter sun which sprayed across his bed; it crawled a little farther each day. All that money! He hadn't thought of money. He closed his eyes sharply.

"Henry!" Mrs. Potts's frightened breathing was close to his face. "I ain't made you worse? Does something hurt you?"

"No." Henry looked at her again. "I was just having an idea. Maria"—his voice steadied as he spoke—"there's that monument subscription. It wouldn't be exactly charity—if they gave you some of that—for the insurance, would it? Even if it meant—well, not such a good stone?" The words riddled his golden sphere, offering a piece of it in barter.

Maria sank into her chair, hugging her arms against her breast. "There ain't any." Her lips shut grimly.

"Any what?"

"Ed Collins started it. And then—his boy told Henry at school—said he felt funny about raising monuments when men weren't dead yet. The boys said mean things to Henry. He was awful mad. You heard him hollering—yesterday noon."

"Did they think I ought to die—sooner?" Mr. Potts whispered. All about him lay the ruins of his glory.

"I don't know. I don't know!" Mrs. Potts suddenly dropped her head to the bed, her thick shoulders heaving.

"Why, Maria! Don't, Maria!"

She lifted her face, gulping. "Who even comes to ask about you now? Mrs. Willie, next door— Oh, folks go on, no matter what anybody did, so long's they ain't hurt."

"Maria, don't take on—" He watched her rub the tears from her eyes. "I'll think about that insurance."

She rose wearily. "I shouldn't of worried you."

"Maybe I can think of a way. I got time to think. You go have a rest."

He heard her closing the draughts of the stove in the dining-room before she climbed the stairs. When the sound of her heavy feet had ceased, he glanced toward the washstand. The newspaper had slipped down out of sight. No matter. He knew the article by heart now. But that wasn't what he was to think about. He thrust away from him the shadow of doubt as to what lay behind the words.

One hundred and fifteen dollars! If it wasn't paid! Suddenly his eyes strained wide, staring at the crack which ran across the white ceiling. Then he gave a little grunt, doubling in his lips to moisten them. There must be some other way. After a long interim, when he scarcely breathed, he began to talk to himself, a thin thread of words from his rigid body.

"You've been hanging around just to enjoy yourself, old Henry Potts. Bothering folks. Just that one way for you to fix things up. That'd fix everything. An' if it sort of scares you, letting go—well—go ahead!" He closed his eyes. "Can't pretend I'm a hero any more," he muttered. Then he lost himself in a rush of icy blackness. Later his heart stirred slightly. He heard the doctor's voice across the dark:

"The stimulants won't take hold. He must have lost courage—to sink this way—"

Courage! The word enticed him back into the light. He was climbing up the side of a great precipice, terrifying, frozen blackness below him, warm light above. Just as he felt his fingers over the edge, he remembered. Clinging there, he heard the doctor: "Quickly, that needle! He's

coming back—" He could have swung himself up into the familiar light. But the other was the only way for Maria and the boy. With a little gasp he loosened his fingers, and dropped.



COMMON SENSE

“THIRTEEN gross large, seventeen small.” Sheldon Thorpe set down the figures opposite *Stork safety pins* at the end of the long typed list. “Straighten up those boxes, Red.” He pushed the green eyeshade up his forehead, moistened a finger, and flipped over the sheet. “That’s all now but the toys.” He glanced down the long aisle, honeycombed with booths; the eyeshade laid a sallow band across his patient, spectacled face.

“Toys aren’t as bad as these flim-flams.” The boy climbed down the step-ladder, rattled it together under his arm, and strode ahead of Sheldon. “Needles and pins and darning cotton and—pshaw!” He spat vigorously as he rounded the end of the aisle. Sheldon reached up to the light in its wire shield, snapped it off, and followed. At the far end of the basement gleamed another light. He saw it as he turned, and went meekly back to snap it off. Have to be careful about such items. Red was whistling and banging up there in the toy booth. Well, toys weren’t so thick in a June inventory. Take Christmas now—

“This cheap stuff for kids is sure a crime.” Red stuck a doll back into its box, and pawed behind the first layer of boxes. “Only nine of these X₂₇₇. Got them in just last week, too.”

“Nine X₂₇₇. Good seller. What’yuh mean, crime?” Sheldon held his blue pencil firmly in the column.

"Five gross sketch books, B83. Crime to give kids such ugly stuff. Cheap and ugly. American made."

"Sells all right. They must like it. How many B84?"

"Sells!" Red clattered the short step-ladder into position and mounted it. "That's all you think of. Twenty-eight—no, twenty-nine gross. Well, I'm through, you bet." He stretched an arm into the next booth, his curly bright head shining under the ceiling light.

The next fifteen minutes they worked in swift silence, save for the announcement and repetition of figures. Then Sheldon folded together the thin sheets, clipped them, and brought his fist down on them.

"That's done. Now I can work out the statements to-morrow. Say, Red, why don't you stay on? If I get moved to a bigger store I'd take you along. We work pretty good together."

"Me stay?" Red's eyes, very blue under their sandy lashes, were round with derision. "To-morrow night I'm a free man. I got cash enough for my fare to the coast, and a job on a sheep boat out of Baltimore."

Sheldon sat down on a box, staring up at the thin, gaunt figure lounging against the ladder.

"You could work up, you know." The green shade with its sallow reflection distorted his face.

"God! What to? You sound like a mother. Keep a steady job, my boy, and work hard. I'm going to Paris, I tell you. That's the only place for an artist. And I'm going right now, before I lose my nerve and begin to worry for fear I won't be able to line my belly."

The narrow aisle, reaching back the length of the basement, bandied his words back and forth in the silence. At a footstep overhead Sheldon started, peering nervously up. It was outside, on the street; some late passerby. The basement ran out under the walk.

"How old are you?" Sheldon's hands dropped over his knees, long, thin, with prominent knuckles, white under the grime of stock-handling.

"Eighteen." Red straightened his shoulders. "Time I was getting down to real work. That night stuff at Chicago

was good, but I want better than that. Real artists. I just stopped off here to see my folks and earn a wad to take me farther."

"I went to work when I was fourteen," said Sheldon. "In a grocery store." He stared at his hands; they looked limp, sick, something apart from him. "I used to play the violin, nights. You get over those ideas."

"I don't," said Red. "Folks want you to. Like I said—keep a steady job and settle down. That's what they tell you. Say—" he leaned forward—"you don't like this, do you?"

Sheldon lifted his head. His knees drew up slightly, as if his whole body made a horrible contraction, a wrenching of rejection. Round him flowed a faint odor, damp, dusty, of cardboard, paint, tin, caught there in the cellar, and holding him.

"Naw, you hate it. I've seen you." Red nodded wisely. "What d'you stick it for?"

"I've been sticking it for more than twenty years." There was something breaking in Sheldon, pulling apart like the strands of rotten rope. He liked Red—liked his funny, crackling voice; his thin, awkward body moving about; his impudent, casual ways. Red was going away. "You're young." He tried to hold those rotten, fraying ends together. "You don't know yet."

"Mebbe I don't know everything." There was in the strong thrust of Red's chin, a stubbornness not of youth nor of age. "I know a thing or two. I've been good and hungry. That's one thing. I've been crazy about a girl. That's another. I know I won't stick at a job I hate. I know I got to find out more about the way of putting down what I see. Look at you, there! You're a bunch of limp triangles, all sprawling out with their apexes smashed together in your solar plexus, and that green light dripping on your face. I could paint that, and that shadow behind you, full of green. It would say something, I tell you. It'd say whether you liked sticking your job. It'd be more than you, too. It'd be all the other poor guys sticking jobs. But I couldn't get that green now. Like water, only thicker."

"I don't see any green behind me." Sheldon sounded irritated; he pulled the eyeshade up from his head and dangled it over a finger.

"You'd see it if I painted it. I can't tell it to you."

"Now that's funny." Sheldon's foot crunched on a bit of excelsior from a packing box, and he stooped mechanically to pick it up. "I remember I used to think that way about a violin. There would be a way of saying things." His fingers twisted the shaving.

"Why didn't you?"

"Why?" Sheldon threw aside the excelsior. The frayed rope had parted, the rope which bound him silent and humble. "I'll tell you! You think all you got to do is go ahead and do what you want to. You can't do what you want to. My mother hated music. Hated the sight of a violin. She thought it was an excuse to stay out late at night. A devil snare. My father—he used to play. I never heard him. He ran away when I was a baby. Left my mother without a cent. She worked—washing, sewing, nursing sick folks. Then one day she got word he was dead in Texas. She had to borrow the money to send for him and bury him. That's what doing what he wanted to did for him and us. I went to work then. 'Keep my boy from being like his father!' I'd hear her praying that at night." Sheldon stopped; against his eyelids he saw, instead of Red, instead of the shadowy, silent store, a half-opened door, a woman kneeling beside a cot, face turned up so that the cords in her thin neck stood out, and her voice—heavy with anguish—"O Lord, make Sheldon a good boy. Faithful, sober, hard working. Spare him. Keep him from the evil ways of his father."

"So I plugged away," he went on, slowly. "I thought if I hated what I had to do, that was a sign I was wicked. It would have seemed sinful to do what you liked. So I worked up—to this. When I'd feel half crazy, as if I couldn't stand it—she'd say I was bilious. My wife, too. She makes me take calomel. Calomel!" Sheldon laughed, and the booths along the aisle took his laugh and knocked it back and forth like a grisly toy. "When my head is full of wild

notions. I think how if I set a match to this excelsior and sat here while it burned? Or I think how I could run through the store and knock the women's heads together where they're pawing over pieces of me. That's what it is, all this stuff. Spools and jumping jacks and knives and kettle covers. Me, scattered around in a million things. I ain't anywhere else. I can't stand it! Calomel!" He stopped; his thin lips seemed to stick together, dry and hot; he could feel cold sweat dripping down his chest. And there was Red, listening to him.

"Whee—oo!" Red thrust his hands into the pockets of his overalls. "Say, I didn't know it was that bad! I thought you were just sorta fed up and sore on it all, needed a vacation."

"I ought not to talk this way to you." Sheldon's misery looked deeply out of his tired, sunken eyes. "But you're different, somehow. And now you're going off. I'd be all right, you know, if I didn't think. If I could stop thinking. There's me, working around, steady, and then there's another fellow, thinking, like a clock in my stomach what won't stop ticking. Lately the thinking's getting the best of me. And here on Wednesday this man's coming, Clinton. Firm representative. To look things over, and if they're o. k., to offer me a better job. Another store. More things."

"Turn him down, old boy." Red's voice was rough and friendly.

"I got to go on. There's my wife, Carrie, and the little girl."

"Turn him down and find something you want to do. God, you don't want to go clean bughouse, do you?"

"What do I want to do?" Sheldon flung out his hands emptily. "This is all I'm good for. And I ain't good for this."

"Selling jimcracks isn't all the world," said Red. "Take a look round."

"There's another thing." Sheldon leaned forward, his shoulders hunched. "I been looking at things, thinking. I had a notion—sorta nightmare, I guess—as if I tiptoed along past the sideshows in a circus. You know, the painted cur-

tains they have to show what's in the sideshow tent? Only the tents are all empty. That's the joke. Empty. There are the curtains, bright pictures of what's in the tent. When you peek in, nothing there. Love, that's one sideshow. Being respectable. What the neighbors think. Common sense. Holding your job. Making money. Nothing behind, only folks don't know it. Mebbe painting pictures is another."

"Mebbe it isn't." Red stood up, stretching. "I tell you." He laid his hand firmly on Sheldon's shoulder. "You come along with me. That's the ticket! Take a year off. Look around. We—you and me get on fine. I'd like a fellow along to speak English to. Beat it. Will you, huh?" He slapped his thigh resoundingly. "Now there you got it. To-morrow night. You could get a job on that sheep boat. Oo-la-la! Find a sideshow that isn't empty. Say, old boy, will you?"

Sheldon sat rigid. He felt Red's wiry, hard enthusiasm boring into his emptiness, gathering together the scattered bits of self.

"That's—" he ran his tongue over his dry lips. "That's what my father did. Ran off." Within him there went on a complete sundering of himself—the Sheldon Thorpe who worked along, diligent, silent—and that other feverish, thinking self. "I couldn't do that." The old Sheldon was shrinking into a crumb. "I've got money enough to leave for Carrie. I could tell her I was going."

"That'd spill the beans," declared Red, scornfully. "No skirt'll let go of a man for a year."

Sheldon got to his feet. The floor came up in lurches to meet him, as if he were drunk.

"I'll not ask her. I'll tell her I'm going, before I go crazy. It's too late for me to try the violin." He held his hands out, shaking. "They're used up on packing boxes and figures—stiff; but there might be something else—something a fellow could be interested in—"

"Sure there is!" Red clapped his shoulder. "Only—" he was doubtful. "If you tell her she'll keep you."

"No!" Sheldon's voice was a shout. "I won't sneak off. Here." He reached into his pocket, fumbled with a wallet. "Here, you get me a ticket." He watched, not breathing,

until Red had folded the bill and slipped it behind his watch. "Now come on." He stumbled over the filing board with the sheets of figures, kicked at it, and strode down the aisle, Red at his heels.

Outside the store he stopped automatically, tried the nightlock, and peered through the draperies of embroidery in the window to see that the office light still burned. Red watched him curiously, his cap twirling in his fingers. Sheldon turned; his feet were steady enough now.

"You'd like me to go with you?"

"Sure as blazes!" Red tossed up his cap, ducked to catch it on his head, reached out his hand for a quick handshake, and swung off down the street.

Sheldon set forth in the opposite direction. He would walk home, even if it was late. He left the business street for dimly lighted side streets. Never had he walked like this, head up, chest high; he could feel the darkness fall aside in smooth waves, and his thoughts, random, inchoate, bits of the old Sheldon, bits of the strange new Sheldon, spreading behind him in a long wake. Only last night, as he had walked, he had thought but one thought, over and over: I wish I was dead. I wish I could die. And to-night! He stopped a moment on the bridge across the river. He should think about Carrie and what he should say to her. Under him the dark water moved softly, and along the bank was the faint cheep of insects. There at the bend of the river he caught the swift reflection of a star. He went on more slowly.

River Park Addition. His house was down here. Funny, how wound up and twisted into one another things in life were. Six—no, seven—years ago this summer a real estate agent had plotted off this land and made a big sale. Sheldon's mother liked the advertisements. She and Sheldon had walked from the car line through the newly laid streets one Sunday, and Sheldon had pulled off the ticket on lot ten. That meant he claimed the lot. He had gone, the following noon, to the agent's office. Carrie was there, behind the desk, with smooth black hair and blue eyes. She seemed to take a fancy to him. And his mother liked her. Demure

and friendly. Sheldon grimaced in the dark. He knew now. Another empty sideshow. Carrie wanted a husband, and a home. She was tired of working in an office. Well—maybe that was what women wanted. She had been good to his mother. Planning the house with her, taking care of her when she was sick. "Carrie's a wonderful wife, Sheldon," his mother had said. "Be sure you deserve her," just before she died.

And the little girl, Marjory—a quiet, docile child. Sheldon thought sometimes that she liked him, but Carrie "wouldn't have her spoiled." Yes, Carrie was a good wife, a good mother. She didn't want any more children.

Perhaps, after all—the leaves from the poplars of his own street whistled under his feet; the dry spring was making them fall early. Perhaps it would be better, as Red said, not to speak to Carrie. She had so many ambitions: a bigger house, a car, a servant. "I've got to tell her," said Sheldon. "I can't sneak off."

Carrie was sewing, sitting close to the piano lamp with its new varnished parchment shade. She looked up, moistening an end of thread on her tongue, a series of regular highlights on her waved hair. Sheldon felt uncomfortable whenever he looked at those waves. Carrie had saved up for months the money for what she called a "permanent," and she hadn't cared for his confession that he thought smooth hair prettier.

"My! you're late," she said. Often her voice had little undertones of implications, even when her words were simple.

"Yes," Sheldon hesitated. He could talk better standing up—but he could lead up better if he sat down, maybe. He started toward the wing chair, but Carrie spoke quickly.

"You're probably all dust from your basement. Sit down there—" She pointed at a little imitation Windsor chair. "I cleaned every bit of the stuffed furniture to-day with the vacuum cleaner."

Sheldon sat down.

"Well?" She looked up from her sewing. "You might tell

me about the reports. Are they good? Good enough to show Mr. Clinton?"

"I haven't made them out." Sheldon looked at his hands, spread on his knees. "We just finished the inventory."

"My! it takes you a long time, doesn't it?" She was whipping lace in place on a dress for Marjory, with brisk, snapping motions. "But you know it's been a good year, anyway. Clinton must do something for you. He hinted he would."

"I don't want him to." Sheldon drew one hand across his forehead, and stared at it, expecting to see it glisten with cold sweat. "Carrie, I want to go away. For a year. I—I've got to go. Or go crazy. I've got a chance..."

Carrie dropped her sewing into her lap, her hands shut firmly on it; and Sheldon, even in the intensity of his absorption, saw with a flicker of alarm that she was not surprised. She looked at him, her eyes as expressionless as blue china, her wide, thin mouth shut firmly.

"I wasn't meant for a storekeeper," Sheldon hurried on. "I can't stand it. If I don't go away, I'll smash, that's all. There's money enough in the bank for you for a year."

"Where"—her voice was quiet—"are you planning to go, if I may ask?"

"I want a chance to look around, to see what I might do." No use to explain more to Carrie. He had just to go.

"You mean you have nothing in view? Nobody's made you a grand offer, I suppose?"

"Nobody's made me any offer," Sheldon drew a long breath. "But I have things in view."

"Just when you begin to make a decent salary for your family, when you are going to have a bigger store offered to you, with all it means, you think you can throw it over. Where is your common sense? You must be crazy!"

"I shall be, I tell you," Sheldon shivered. What was there so formidable in the lack of surprise in Carrie's face? He had expected to find her impregnable, just because she was Carrie; but she seemed to be saying to herself, "I told you so!" She seemed to have lain in wait for him, traps set, guns trained, as if she had known that he would come home with

these words, as if she had even seen him peering into the emptiness behind the sideshow placards. "I tell you I can't endure it any longer. I'm going away, to look."

"Just like your father." Carrie folded her hands primly in her lap. "Your mother warned me. I've felt it coming. The way you've sneered at me. Picking at your food, and not eating. Sheldon, I won't allow you to disgrace yourself and your family." Her voice was unwaveringly clear. "I shall save you from yourself. Have you no ambition, no decency? Think of your innocent child."

"Ambition?" Sheldon felt his heart thundering against walls of ice. "To make more money? No! I have an ambition, to find—to find myself. To find something I can do, where I won't wish I was dead every hour in the day. I've been brought up to hate my father, sneaking off in the night and leaving a woman with a baby. Maybe he couldn't help himself. I'm telling you I've got to go."

"Couldn't help himself? If you aren't wicked and weak you can help yourself." In each of Carrie's cheeks, just under the prominent cheekbones, flared a spot of crimson. "Perhaps you think I like what I have to do, day after day. I haven't complained, have I? I know my duty, and I do it, I hope."

"Do you hate it, day after day?" Sheldon stared at her, trying to fit that idea into place. "You don't wish you could die?"

"I'm not as wicked as that. Nobody likes what he has to do to get along. Here I gave up a good position to be your wife, and I've been as good a wife as I could."

"Well, there!" Sheldon was suddenly triumphant. "That's easy. You could get your job back again, while I..."

"For heaven's sake!" Carrie's voice was almost shrill, but it dropped immediately into its controlled level. "Announce myself to the world as a deserted wife? Sheldon, what are you thinking of?"

"There's money enough without that. For at least a year."

"What do you suppose I've been working for? So that you could get ahead. No man has ever had so much en-

couragement. First your mother, and then me. You can't do anything else. You're too old to tackle a new kind of work, and anyway, you'd get tired of that too. It isn't," she added, with an undertone of sharp malice, "as if you were a genius. You have to plod along to get anywhere."

"You don't know what I might have been," cried out Sheldon, "if I'd ever had a chance!"

"I know it's taken you a long time to get where you can earn enough money to support your family decently."

"And you'd have me go on sticking it"—Red's phrase came back—"so I can buy you more stuffed furniture too good for me to sit on, and more—"

"Most men take some pride in what they can buy for their wives."

"Even when I tell you I'm going mad—that I may kill myself—"

"Sheldon, you're all tired out." Carrie rose quietly and stood beside him. "You come to bed. It's only when you're overworked that this weak strain in you comes out. You better ask Doctor Riley for a tonic. Something to brace you up." She laid her hand on his shoulder.

Sheldon shut his eyes a moment. He thought her fingers crept up to his throat, closed about it, choking him. Cautiously he lifted his lids—no, he could see her fingers, lying softly there on his shoulder.

"I can't take a new store, a larger one. I'll fizzlie it."

"Nonsense." She brushed away his words with a light gesture. "Come on to bed. I've said all I'm going to. But you'll take the store Clinton offers you, and do well. We won't even discuss it any more. In the morning you'll have more common sense."

Sheldon stumbled to his feet and crossed to the dark bedroom. As he heard Carrie lock the front door and snap out the light, he laughed. She hadn't fooled him! Back of that calm blue gaze of hers, she was worried. She wasn't sure. Talk! God, he didn't want to talk any more. He'd said all he meant to say. He'd warned her. He laughed again.

He was still laughing, inside, at breakfast the next morning, a mocking, chittering laughter, like a flock of witless birds. Carrie, in fresh blue gingham, pouring the coffee, bidding Marjory to tell her Daddy all about the nice walk they had taken along the river; Marjory, her solemn little voice running on and on. When he left the house, Marjory was sweeping the poplar leaves away from the sidewalk with her ridiculous red-handled broom. Stock number G582, mumbled Sheldon. He watched her a moment. The slender neck, cream white, with a delicate hollow, under cropped dark hair, stopped the chittering laughter. It began again as he walked along, with the thought of Carrie hurrying into the bedroom where he was looking for a clean collar. To see if he had taken any of his clothes! He hadn't. Wouldn't need them, on a sheep vessel.

The long morning held a brief encounter with Red; Sheldon had followed him down to the basement. Red held up a strip of green ticket.

"Still want it?" he grinned.

"Yes." Sheldon touched it. "You keep it. I'll meet you at the train."

"Nine-ten she goes." Red stuck the ticket away in a pocket. "Say, this afternoon I got to leave early. My folks—and there's a girl I got to see. You don't mind? So long as we're both skipping."

Sheldon knew he wanted Red there, every minute until he could lock the front door of the stoor behind him. But he nodded. As he climbed the stairs he heard Red's loud whistle retreating behind the stock shelves.

He would figure up the reports. Might as well leave things all clear. He worked steadily into the afternoon. Overhead, loss, sales. The figures crawled like insects under his eyes. From his office, slightly elevated at the rear of the store, he could gaze out over this fantastic representation of his past life. It's all right, he thought, if you don't look at it too hard. Take the matter of loss on goods, now. How serious he had been, teaching the feather-brained clerks to keep their goods fresh, not to let papers get wrinkled, or

embroideries mussed. Those crêpe paper decorations on the walls—he'd worked like a fool to get them hung. And *what for?* A violent gesture of his hand sent a blot sprawling over his neat page, and he reached mechanically for a bottle of ink eradicator. The old Sheldon had taken all that seriously enough. It was all right, so long as you didn't begin to think.

"Well, well, how's the chief administrator?" The loud, cheerful voice was a hook, plucking him forcibly out of his circling thoughts. Mr. Clinton leaned over the railing of the office, his hand extended, his prominent blue eyes assaulting Sheldon. "Giving an imitation of a hard-working man, eh?" His smile pulled his full lips back from uneven, small teeth. "Didn't expect me till to-morrow, I know. I got through early at Fenton, and burned up the road a little between here and there."

Sheldon was mumbling something, shaking hands, shifting chairs to make room for Clinton.

"I'm not ready for you," he said. His thoughts were frightened minnows, darting about. It wouldn't make any difference, Clinton's coming to-day. Carrie wouldn't know he was in town. Sheldon could stay late at the store as he had planned. Clinton needn't suspect. Damn the man, why hadn't he waited until Wednesday! "Been figuring the turnover."

"Doesn't matter." Clinton lounged easily in the chair, knees crossed, a neat clocked-silk ankle swinging. "The firm knows what it's got in you. Mere matter of form, asking you for reports now, you know."

As he went on Sheldon listened to his deep, over-cheerful tones, and watched the startled minnows darting. "It's his silk shirts I hate, and his eyes popping out of his head. His patronizing ways—well, my little fellow, see how smart I am. Like to tell him—his eyes would stick out some if I said I didn't give a tinker's dam for the whole shooting-match."

"So there're these two stores in Class A," Clinton was finishing, "both in need of a good steady hand to jerk them up. One in Indiana, one in Wisconsin. Which would you like to try? The firm believes in your ability to take hold and pull them up. We haven't got the business from them

they're capable of. It's the steady, quiet fellow like you that makes the fine manager."

"You better let me think it over." "He expects me to look grateful and impressed," thought Sheldon, while an echo of the chittering laughter of the morning rattled in his head. "To-morrow I can give you an answer."

"That's right. Talk it over with the wife, eh?" Clinton rose. "Then there's the matter of a little stock. You'll have a fine bonus, and the company likes its managers of Class A stores to hold enough stock so they have a feeling of belonging to the firm. Not much is available. I could arrange that for you. Well, I'll look around a little. Don't bother to come." He strolled off, his tall, thin body swaggering a little, his protruding blue eyes searching out the pretty faces behind the counters.

"Belonging to the firm!" Sheldon's fists closed on the papers littering his desk. "I'll show 'em. Steady, quiet—bah! Be a good little boy, and see what we'll give you."

He was crouched over the desk, his face stubborn and white, when a voice at his elbow whanged into him. He lifted his head, to see Carrie, an effect of restraint fluttering over her features, even over her silk dress and flowered hat, and behind her, his Panama balanced on a finger, Clinton.

"Isn't this nice, Sheldon," said Carrie. "Mr. Clinton says he can take dinner with us. So lucky I dropped in. I came to rescue my poor husband, Mr. Clinton. He works too hard for your old firm." She pouted ingratiatingly up at Clinton. "He said he wasn't coming home till just awful late, so I came down to insist. A chicken in the fireless cooker. And now you'll take potluck with us—"

"I'm not through here." Sheldon eyed Carrie grimly. That demure, shy fluttering of hers was a great bluff. He knew why she had come.

"No hurry about this work now, old man." Clinton lounged beside Carrie. "Or is he such a demon for work that he can't join us in celebrating his promotion, Mrs. Thorpe?"

That shook Carrie's demureness for an instant. Her eyes leaped to Sheldon's face, hard, full of warning, of triumph. "You've got it?" She turned to Clinton, her hands, neat

and small in silk gloves, pressed imploringly together. "Tell me about it!"

"If you'll excuse me a minute." Sheldon swung the gate open. "Just sit down in here, both of you." He had heard the banging of the cash registers, which indicated that Miss Wilck, the floorwalker, was making her evening rounds. Time to lock the doors. The long, sultry day was over. He stood at the front door, to allow the few dallying customers to depart. Sudden bustling animation behind the counters: goods jerked into order, noses being powdered, a chattering renewal of life at the prospect of escape. "Good-night, Mr. Thorpe. Good-night. Good-night." And back there in the office, those two. Suppose he walked out with the clerks, down the street. He had a vision of himself skulking in alleys behind the stores, hiding, and Carrie in pursuit. Where could he go until that train was due?

Miss Wilck pressed into his hand the striped canvas money bag. He had to put that into the safe. He didn't intend to run off as a thief. The store was empty now, silent, except for the two in the office. Carrie had a queer laugh, he thought. Pitched too high.

No escaping them at this point. He would have to go home with them. Plenty of time before the train, anyway.

"Pretty snug, eh?" Clinton settled himself behind the wheel in his roadster. Carrie giggled softly. She was peering about, hoping, Sheldon knew, for a glimpse of some one who would recognize her in the shining red car. The touch of her light silk made his skin crawl sluggishly.

"So good of you to spare us an evening," she was saying.

"Think of me having a chance at dinner in a home." Clinton swung out from the curb. "Home cooking! I want to get my teeth in that chicken you were talking about. Now tell me where I turn. Let's not get pinched for speeding, heh?"

"Isn't this an elegant car, Sheldon?" Carrie's ears were pink under the ripple of waved hair. "It rides so easy."

Sheldon twisted his hand away from contact with her dress. This was what Carrie liked. She should have married

some one like Clinton. What kind of wife did Clinton have?

Carrie thought she had him now, wedged in that seat, dragged home to dinner, committed definitely. Nine-ten, Red had said. Not three hours away. He'd have to make a bolt for it.

A nice little home dinner. Carrie spread her best linen, unrolled her best silver from its cotton-wool wrapping, made little darts to the door of the living room to cry out, "You'll starve, I'm afraid! But I'm hustling." Marjory came home from the neighbor's, stood shy and unwilling while Mr. Clinton tried to coax her onto his knee, stared round-eyed at his hearty, "Not old enough yet for that, eh?" and disappeared for her supper. "Will you see that she's in bed all right, Sheldon?" Carrie called to him.

Sheldon was thankful to escape the grind of talk with the guest. He stood beside Marjory's cot. She wanted him to make a bow of the wispy red ribbon about the neck of her fuzzy gray dog. How little she was! He fumbled with the ribbon. If he never came back would Carrie teach her to hate him? But he meant to come back. He wasn't deserting them. Just taking a little time to look round.

"Nice daddy!" Marjory flung her arms round his neck.

"Little pipestems." Sheldon touched her wrists gently, and patted the sheet into place under her chin. "You ought to get fatter."

He glanced back from the door. Funny little tyke, so solemn. "Think of your innocent child," said Carrie. He wasn't doing her any good, just sticking. If he could find something, could amount to something, then he might.

Carrie maneuvered an aside as she carried the platter of chicken to the table.

"For heaven's sake, brace up! You make me ashamed, the way you act!"

Brace up, when all his being leaned perilously toward that nine-ten train, when time—two hours now—had grown more tangible than space, and he moved through it heavily, like a winded runner.

Clinton was spinning an interminable yarn about his first

job with the firm, and Carrie listened, poised in admiring attention. Why couldn't they eat and get through? He knocked a spoon to the floor and bent clumsily to reach for it, trying to extract his watch far enough to read the face. Eight. He'd have to allow a half hour from the house. No way to get a taxi down here. He couldn't run through the streets; some one would see him. That meant forty minutes left. Forty—what was Carrie saying?

"I suppose you never get discouraged, do you?" Her voice blurred into undertones of meaning. "Tired of your work?"

"A man can't allow that if he's going to get ahead, you know." Clinton was masterful, assured. "The game's to the fellow that goes straight after what he wants, with lots of pep, forges ahead to success. That's the American business man. He isn't tired. Discouragement belongs to the fellows that keep park benches warm. The Go-Getter! He's the man."

"It's just a matter of will, isn't it?" Carrie's glance pecked swiftly at Sheldon as she rose to clear away the salad course.

"That's the idea. Will and brains and pep. You're a wonderful cook, Mrs. Thorpe, if I may say so."

Dessert and coffee. Sheldon's tongue was swollen and thick, until he felt that another mouthful would choke him. Would they never finish? He couldn't bolt away from the table, when Carrie was so pleased about her dinner—humiliating her. Unbelievable, to be held fast by a web as frail as that—just manners. But he couldn't go. If he didn't make that train, if Red went without him, he knew, suddenly, that he would never go. It was Red's fire that had touched him into action.

"I wondered," Carrie was saying, "if I might suggest—" she deprecated astutely her daring in offering a suggestion to the great Mr. Clinton—"a little vacation before Sheldon goes to the new store? He's been working very hard."

"Fine! Much better than interrupting the work there later in the summer. A little fishing trip. Or a motor trip—but you haven't bought your car yet, have you? Well—"

Vacation! Suppose he got up and said, "Keep your

damned store. I'm through. I'm leaving." He couldn't move his thick tongue. They were all rising, now, going into the living room. Carrie had his box of cigars.

"No matches? Sheldon, dear—"

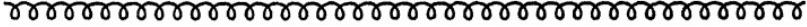
He plunged into the kitchen. The back door—if he had his hat. Could he start for Europe without a hat? His hand touched the latch of the screen door, jerked violently back at the sound of a step—Carrie, coming through the dining room.

"Mr. Clinton's going to take us for a little drive, Sheldon. I'm going over to ask Mrs. Purdy to sit here with Marjory till we get back."

She hurried past him, out of the door. He saw her pass the band of light from the living-room windows, saw her outlined in the rectangle of yellow from the Purdy's side door. She could see him if he ran out. He had to find Red! He'd wait till she came back, then dodge. Perhaps they'd chase him in that red car. But he might make it. She was laughing, the high, thin sound coming across the shadowy lawn. At last she turned and hurried back. Sheldon drew out his watch. Time, that dreary, lengthy track down which he had been running, spent and thick-tongued, had come to an end. Round and round jerked the tiny second-hand. Nineteen, nine-eleven. Red had gone. Gone.

Carrie was at his side, catching his elbow in her hand.

"She's coming right over. Sheldon, isn't it splendid! Now come on, and do cheer up!"



THE FLAW

“**Y**ou know, I never should have believed a game could be so exciting.” Celia swung her racket above the dandelions that shone along the walk. Her small, fine face and slender throat, unflushed, suggested an inner glow, swift blood through transparent veins.

Her companion, striding beside her, looked down for a deliberate moment before he answered, “Glad I bullied you into trying it, then?”

“If you think I can learn soon, soon to play well!”

“Of course you’ll learn. You’ve got speed—and you’re cool. But isn’t it fun?”

“I dislike being an amateur. It’s so bungling. I like to do the things I can do perfectly.” Her voice curved about the last word, and her gray eyes, lifted an instant, had a defiant passion in their glance.

“I’m afraid perfectly would limit me to—nothing. I like trying things I can’t do. Some bungling, I guess, but adventures, too.”

“Oh, but you do things well. Think of everything you’ve persuaded me to try these last two weeks!”

“Just a happy amateur, Miss Duryea.”

“I am limited. I meant only that I don’t like to bungle. My father has given me that ideal—” Her words might have sounded priggish, cold, but in her tone, in her quick upward glance, lay entreaty.

They turned at the corner, Celia walking ahead over soft grass. Ralph Monroe followed, his blue eyes and straight, firm lips settling into gravity as he watched her, the swing of her pongee dress about slim ankles, the coil of brown hair at the base of her neck.

"After all," he said, "whatever you do becomes beautifully done—by your doing it. I suppose I'm rushing into another thing I don't know how to do—" he went on earnestly. "But if I bungle this, I'm done for! I've persuaded you to see me a little—to like me a little! Have I? You know I'm on earth?"

Celia walked on, a hint of flight in her step.

"That night Mrs. Duryea brought me to dinner—why, I might have thought I wasn't there, from all the attention you gave me!"

"I didn't know you—"

"Know me! You weren't aware I existed! Drifting off after dinner—I knew then I had to make you aware of me! You had to come out of that beautiful indifferent shell before you could hear what I had to say to you!"

There was color in Celia's cheeks at last. And, turning toward the house, the two walked through streaks of pale, late sunlight stretching over the grass and casting a tracery of the old elms across the face of the square white house.

"I don't want to startle you, Celia Duryea. Sometimes I'm afraid you may vanish overnight. There's some enchantment on you! But I can't be patient! I can't wait! Celia!"

They reached the steps of the porch. Celia faced him, close enough to know the fast rhythm of his breathing. She cowered under the intensity of his bending over her. Within her something new and young pushed up through darkness and cold, heavy soil, up to strange light.

"Tennis again? Well, well!" The voice behind them broke the moment. "Good evening, Mr. Monroe." Mrs. Duryea extended a brisk hand. "Well, Celia? I'm glad I caught you. Stay to dinner. I need to be amused." She sent him a darting, humorous glance out of eyes gray like Celia's, set in a firm, sensible face. She moved up the steps with jerks of her com-

pact body, pulling the pins from her jaunty hat. At the door she turned, her fingers brushing back wisps of brown hair.

"You are staying, aren't you?"

"I certainly am, if I may." Ralph was after her in time to hold the door open. With a touch on his arm, Mrs. Duryea went into the dark hall.

"If you don't mind?" he asked Celia, who came toward him.

"I'd like you to stay—" began Celia, her eyes meeting his. Her face had a luminous expectancy. At the sound of her mother's voice within, her glance leaped past him:

"Oh, Philip! Back to-day! We didn't expect you until to-morrow."

A man's voice, thin, answering, "I judged I was premature."

Celia's face quivered. She looked at Ralph, almost with horror. Then she went swiftly into the hall, her low, "Father!" winging back to Ralph.

Her mother had started up the stairs; she stood, one hand tapping on the polished rail, her mouth a little pursed. Between the heavy curtains of the library door stood Mr. Duryea, slight, immaculate, his pointed gray beard and black-ribboned eye-glasses concealing his expression. He limped forward to meet Celia.

"When did you come?" She had his hand in both of hers, and bent for his ritualistic kiss.

"This afternoon." He held her off at arm's-length. The light glanced across his glasses and small blue eyes with a metallic luster. "I wished you to go over some notes with me."

"I'm sorry." Celia released his hand. "You said to-morrow—"

"What have you been doing? I never saw you look so-blowsy!"

Celia moved away, her mouth and eyelids contracted.

"Nonsense, Philip." Mrs. Duryea spoke in a brisk undertone. "You mean you never saw her looking as though she had had so much fun! Mr. Monroe!" She raised her voice. "Won't you come in? This is my husband. Philip, this is

Ralph Monroe, who dropped into town just as you left."

Celia held her breath for an instant as Ralph extended his hand with a decided, "I am glad to meet you, Mr. Duryea." But her father was prompt with his hand.

"How do you do, Mr.—what was it? Monroe? A newcomer in our little town, eh?" He seemed to shrink, to turn more gray, under the tanned bulk of the young man.

"I'm only temporary."

"Settling up the affairs of his uncle—Walter Monroe, you know. Will you excuse us a few minutes?" Mrs. Duryea went on up the stairs.

"Tell father about some of your bridge-making—" Celia's fleet glance at Ralph was interrupted half-way by her consciousness of her father's stare. "I'm sure he'd be interested." She followed her mother, her nostrils dilating at her father's formal, "Won't you come into the library?"

The door of her mother's room was open. Celia, her eyes averted quickly from the loud cheerfulness of cretonne and bright rugs, slipped past to her own room. Closing herself within her familiar gray walls, she stared across the room at her reflection in the long mirror between the windows. "Blowsy!" she whispered, defiantly. Ralph had not thought that, bending over her outside in the pale sunlight. She shivered. The subtle colors and outlines of the room flowed about her, an accustomed flood into which she left herself down, submerged. It was her father who had said that! He had come home, to find her not there. And she—she saw vividly how he had seen it—she had come in like any common thing, with her young man, warm, blown—Hastily her fingers stripped off her dress, pulled out hairpins. She would show him his Celia again!

A sharp rap at the door, her mother's voice, "Celia!" She turned from her dressing-table, her bare, slim arms up-arching to the coil of bright hair she had just caught in place.

"Oh, changing your dress?" Her mother looked in, her face rosy above her stiff collar. "Will you be down soon? I've got to go back to the store—Saturday, you know."

"Yes. At once."

"Well." She waited. "Celia—"

The girl's arms dropped, stiffened. She moved to the closet, returned, shaking out folds of dull-green silk, over which her eyes just touched her mother's for an instant of hostile rejection. Mrs. Duryea closed the door. Celia heard her quick descent of the stairs.

Presently Celia went down, softly. From the rear of the house came her mother's voice in an undertone of domestic comment. Silence in the library. Celia paused. Her mother appeared at the end of the hall.

"Supper's ready," she said. "Just tell them, will you?"

From the library her father's voice, "You have only a few days more, then, to suffer the dullness of our town?"

"Oh, I haven't found it dull! On the contrary—thanks to Mrs. Duryea and your daughter."

"Ah yes. You met Mrs. Duryea in her—shop, I suppose?"

There was a pause after that. Had Ralph felt the sneer beneath the query?

"My father had asked me to look her up. And I remembered her, too, from the time when I visited my uncle, years ago."

Celia pushed the curtains apart. Her father, sunk in his armchair, was gazing under lowered lids at his hands, fingertips touching delicately. Ralph, sprawling in a chair beyond the table, looked up and sprang to his feet with a sudden lifting of the perplexed frown with which he was studying the father. Celia, eluding his glance, waited for her father to see her. He rose slowly, appraising her. The soft green draperies sheathed her slender body; her throat and face against the dark curtains, above the dull green of her dress, had a tender, pale fragility. But her father made her no sign of recognition. Celia felt suddenly cold to her fingertips; his eyes held her accusingly, pouring through her a bitter draught of guilt, of treachery. All that in a brief moment. Then Ralph was speaking:

"Won't you have this chair, Miss Duryea? I was just telling your father that I had known Mrs. Duryea really for years!"

His warm, direct glance of admiration pulled her up.

"I'm to bring you out to dinner at once." She smiled faintly.

"Take Mr. Monroe out. I'll come."

Ralph followed Celia down the hall. At the door he was at her shoulder with a swift whisper, "You beautiful, lovely Celia!"

Then they were in the bright, square dining-room, with Mrs. Duryea pointing to his place, and Mr. Duryea limping slowly toward the table.

When Celia thought of that dinner, later, it was in terms of a polished dark surface, with wheels and wheels, doilies, plates, cups, revolving slowly, and at the edges, hands. The long fingers of her father, serving, with motions deliberate and delicate; the smooth, plump hands of her mother, in quick gestures; the hands across the table, supple, large, deft; the black, fat hands of Kate, breaking in at the edge of the surface. Things were said, of course. Her mother chattered; Ralph talked; her father spoke at times, his words like a needle.

The needle plunged at her in a silence toward the end of the revolutions.

"You seem weary, Celia. What have you done with yourself while I've been gone?"

"I hope tennis hasn't tired you, Miss Duryea."

"No, indeed. I'm not tired." Celia drew back in her chair, meeting the glance of the two men. She found herself suddenly rigid, the apex where two forces clashed and hung, immobile, opposed, unyielding.

Her mother pushed back her chair. "I must get back to work. You lazy people can sit on the veranda."

"I'll walk along with you if I may, Mrs. Duryea," Ralph said.

Mrs. Duryea hung fire, looking at Celia. Then she said, calmly, "Must you go so soon?"

"Baxter, my lawyer, wants me to see a man about the sale of that land."

He waited at the door for Mrs. Duryea. Mr. Duryea, with a casual "Good night," had gone into the library. Celia, her hands interlaced, stood just outside the curtains.

"I suppose we can't play tennis on Sunday in this town?"

"No. Shocking!" Celia's head was bent, as though she listened to the slight shuffle of her father's lame foot behind the curtains.

"How about a ride, then?" Ralph spoke eagerly. "I'll come around with that very shiny buggy—"

Celia shook her head. "Not to-morrow, I'm afraid. Father has brought some work he wishes me to go over—and school opens Monday again."

"But you won't need all day—"

Mrs. Duryea came down the stairs.

"I don't know—how much of it—" Celia held out her hand imploringly. "Good night, Mr. Monroe."

He touched her hand, his face twisted into the frown of perplexity she had seen there earlier. Silently he pushed open the door for Mrs. Duryea, and followed her down the steps. When his square shoulders had disappeared, Celia, with a gesture of open, loose hands, went between the curtains, into the study, into the steady inspection of her father. He sat again in his low chair, his fingers playing against the arms.

"Don't tell me I heard that—young man—offering you a buggy ride!"

"Yesterday," said Celia, "we drove along the river road."

"In a 'buggy'?" His pointed beard, lifted eyebrows, and smiling mouth were all satiric angles.

"The peach-trees are just showing pink." She dropped into the chair beside him. Her words acted as the note to set vibrating all that afternoon—golden-brown river swift between green-gold willows, the orchard pricking its faint glow against a spring sky, smooth breeze, silence. Then her father's words, another note, contending, so that again she felt herself the rigid, immobile point of conflict.

"You have been generous of your days."

"You don't like him?"

"Celia dear! Am I supposed to take him on to that extent! I come home eager to see you. You aren't here. After hours you come—and I look out to see a stranger ogling you!"

Celia winced. He had seen that moment in front of the house.

"And then your mother rushes in, shovels this stranger into my study"—those tapering fingers of his pushed through the dark soil of her heart, in sure quest of that new quickening—"and leaves him here"—Mr. Duryea stretched back in his chair, puffing his cheeks, pushing open his coat, thrusting his thumbs into his belt—"boring me with tales of his prowess"—he deepened his voice and roughed his intonations—"and his long acquaintance with my family."

Celia's face grew warm—the burlesque had a cruel dexterity.

"He is a worthy young man, no doubt." Her father shifted forward, his hands about one knee. "Just the qualities that would attract your mother." For another moment his eyes held her with their hard luster, as though he gave a final twist to whatever young live thing he had found. "Discrimination, Celia!" Then, with a sigh, he rose.

"Now let me show you—" His voice softened. As he limped around the table he laid his cold fingers for an instant on Celia's hands. "Did I write after I saw MacLaren? No. He wishes to use some of your sketches in the second part of the manual. Several of the details of Greek ornament, one or two of your little winter sketches." He came back to the table with his bag. "He thinks the book will be a success."

Celia lay back in her chair, a long tremor running over her body under the soft insistence of her father's voice.

"This is for your share—" He held out a small white box. As Celia looked up, mutely, he opened it and extended his hand. In the palm lay a small, irregular bit of jade, a pendant on a thin gold chain. "Like the under curve of a wave, frozen, isn't it!" He fastened it around her throat.

Celia's eyes filled with tears. "It's beautiful—"

"It becomes you." He came back to his chair. "I have some cuts for the manual to show you, and all the proof to go over. We'll do them to-morrow."

They sat in silence, Celia with a finger touching the bit of jade. She stirred.

"I think I shall go up-stairs." She stood in front of her

father, meeting his sudden sharp peering with a smile. "To be quite fresh to-morrow. Good night."

"It's good to have you again," he sent after her, with a friendly wave of his hand. "Sleep well."

After she had undressed she stood for a time in the dark window, her kimono caught together in one hand doubled over her heart, the curtain blowing rhythmically against her cheek. The soft, misty sky with its few stars hung near the earth. Slowly past her swung the hours of the weeks just over. Hours out of doors, in sunshine, with spring winds; once a shower, through which they had run home, laughing. In them all, this man, sunshine on his fair, heavy hair, his white teeth flashing at her, his strong, sure hands— Her hand clutched at the folds. Hours making her blowsy! Making her forget—ah, everything she had built toward, all her life. Deliberately she rehearsed the mocking imitation her father had given. Her mother would like such a man—robust, sturdy, commonplace. She trampled down the soil her father had probed. Surely whatever had stirred there was dead.

But hours later, when Mrs. Duryea came, Celia lay still awake, her eyes held by the dark space of window with its shadow of motion. She did not move as her mother came up the stairs, her tired step loud in the silent house.

The next afternoon Celia straightened her shoulders from long bending over the desk, and gently, so that the sound should not wake her father, asleep on the couch, piled together the proof-sheets. She read again the title-page, "Modern Methods of Instruction in Drawing: A Manual for Teachers," and slipped that into place on top of the pile. At a shifting of the light across the papers she looked up. Her mother had parted the curtains. Celia shook her head quickly, with a gesture toward the couch. Mrs. Duryea held the curtain back, imperatively, and Celia followed her, reluctantly, into the hall.

"What is it?" she asked, coolly. "Don't wake him. He's very tired."

"Come out here, then." Mrs. Duryea went out to the dining-room, stripping off her huge white garden-gloves, dropping them with her trowel on a chair before she spoke.

"Celia, Ralph wants to see you. He's in the garden."

"I told him I should be busy all day." Celia wheeled, to escape to the library, but Mrs. Duryea caught her arm.

"He asked me to tell you that he must leave town tomorrow. You can't be absurd and rude, after all—"

"Is it so rude, not to wish to see him?"

Mrs. Duryea withdrew her hand.

"It hasn't taken your father long, has it!" Dull red mottled her cheeks.

Celia flung up her head, her mouth hard, but before she spoke her mother, with a small laugh, had darted between her and the door.

"There, I didn't mean to say a thing. But Ralph is waiting out there, below the grape-arbor. It will do no harm for you to be civil. If you don't"—her breath was quick—"I'll just walk him right into the library!"

Celia stared at her mother, curious amazement shooting through her anger. She crossed the room slowly, to the outer door.

A graveled path led down a terrace to the garden behind the house, fenced off by a long trellis hung with tangled grapevines, still bare. Ralph rose from the bench under an old apple-tree in the corner, and watched her slow coming.

"I saw your mother out here, planting seeds." He was gravely apologetic. "You had said you would be busy, but I ventured to run in. I had a telegram—some difficulty about a contract. Won't you sit down?"

Celia seated herself, erect and still.

"You see, I couldn't go without seeing you—" He dropped beside her, twirling his hat between his knees. "You know that, don't you!"

"It wasn't necessary." Celia's eyelids were heavy.

"Yes, it was!" He flung the hat aside. "But don't look so far off. Has some one put a spell on you overnight, to turn you back to stone?" He swung around on the bench, bracing himself with one hand near her shoulder. "You can't scare me now! Not after yesterday—and the day before—"

About them lay the faint odor of warmed earth. Celia felt the sun on her hands, along her arms—or was it only the

warm, bantering tone which hung a little in the quiet garden? She lifted her eyes. Ralph's face between her and the clear sky, the line of lean cheek and chin tautly defined.

"Celia, Celia!" Was it her name, that tender, silver word? Celia flinched away from the hand so near her shoulder. The steady, clear eyes waited, while that silver "Celia" dropped, dropped, down to a hidden door, behind which, cold, bound, she could not move. Yesterday, at the sound, she had pushed open that door!

"Celia!" Ralph bent close to her. "You know what I want! You! I want you to go with me when I go, to-morrow! Now I've found you, I can't let you go for a day! You might escape. Perhaps I'm too fast—but, Celia, I love you. There isn't time enough for half the things we can do together. Dear—" His hand closed over hers. "You'll come, Celia? That's what you meant, last night, there at the steps!"

Her hand, under his fingers, was a traitor to her! Her heart had slipped into it, a mad, riotous thing. In her ears hummed a thin wire, her father's voice, "Ogling you!"

"It will take a lifetime to tell you how lovely you are, Celia—and, oh, the fun we'll have! I've told your mother, and she wished me luck!"

Celia's hand tore away from his.

"You've discussed—this—with her!"

"Just now, when I had to see you." His forehead wrinkled a little. Pushing back his coat, he caught his thumb in his belt.

The bright clashing within Celia stopped, with an abrupt, terrible silence. She saw her father, his pointed brows derisive. "Just the qualities that would attract your mother—" What had so narrowly betrayed her! She rose.

"I'm sorry you have misunderstood—my enjoyment of tennis—or driving." Her voice was brittle. "Perhaps your discussions with my mother misled you."

Ralph was on his feet. His clear, steady gaze had changed, like a mirror splintered by a blow.

"Did I misunderstand you yesterday? What has happened to you since?"

"Nothing has happened, Mr. Monroe. But I must go in now—"

"I won't let you go!" He confronted her squarely. "That would be crazy! What has happened? Celia, you can't go back. I love you! Is it"—he hesitated—"something your father said? He didn't take to me—"

"Did my mother tell you to say that?" No longer was Celia the rigidity of two forces clashed and held by their violence. They had slipped from that immobile grapple into tearing destruction, and out of the pain she struck at him. "My father take to you! Oh, let me go!"

Ralph's hands lifted to make a barrier.

"I don't wonder at his hating any one who might want you," he said, slowly. "But that couldn't make you hate me, could it?"

"I don't hate you." Celia's face had a tense pallor. "It's only—I lapse so dreadfully—from what he thinks I am—all the fineness—he wants in me—" She tried to push past Ralph.

But his arms went out, had her, held her. She shut her eyes against his face, close, demanding.

"Celia, you're all beauty—I love you. Do you hear? And you love me—" Then his lips were on hers. Something rushed through her, a swift fire, a strong, sweet shouting. But she struggled away and ran past him, blindly, down the path to the house.

At the door of the dining-room she halted, her arms out to the door-jamb to steady herself. Across the room, rounding the table with his swift, syncopated walk, his face like a gargoyle's in its sneer, came her father.

In front of her he stopped, his shoulders crooked, his face keeping its sneer. Celia felt her whole being crawl, like a green and sluggish tide. Finally he spoke.

"So. While I sleep you slink out to the philander in the kitchen garden—like a drab! May I ask you to choose some decent privacy if you must kiss young men?" He thrust his face close to hers, the sneer twitching like a mask of cambric. "Thought you could hoodwink me! What—what haven't I done for you? And you scramble into the first arms open to you—"

To Celia her blood seemed to clot in her ears, in her eyes, so that she would not hear his words, could not see that cambric mask. Faintly she heard another voice, her mother's.

"Are my garden things here, my gloves?" She bustled in.
"Oh yes. Here they are." She drew them on.

Mr. Duryea spun around, one hand, the fingers curled, flung toward her.

"You—you— This is your scheme!"

"Philip, you have already said more than enough to be sorry for." She walked toward him, swinging her trowel.
"You'd better count ten—or, better, about five hundred!"

Her father crouched a little. Before he spoke again Celia fled, through the hall, up the stairs, his words snarling and yelping at her heels.

She pushed her door shut. From the room below, rising like a vapor, came the ominous cadence of emotion, formless, wordless. Then silence. A humming blackness floated toward her, out of the corners of the room. Steadily fighting it off, she walked across to the couch. She sat down and presently the humming darkness flowed back into the corners.

Something had crashed. She was too tired to stoop for the pieces, to see what had gone. Queer she felt so numb. Cold, too.

Her father had said those things—ugly, unjust, horrible! Perhaps—her face showed a brief flare of horror over its gray numbness—had she deserved those things? But for once that wire failed to work. Something had smashed through the delicate mechanism of self-reproach. With a twist of her body she lay face downward on the couch, her hands pressed over her ears as if to shut out the words she had heard.

Dusk filled the room.

A rap at the door shuddered through her body. She did not move when the door opened, nor when her mother's light step stopped beside the couch.

"I thought you might like some tea," she said, casually. Celia did not move. "Come, Celia."

"Please go away."

The cup clinked on the table. Mrs. Duryea put one arm under Celia's body and pulled her firmly up against her shoulder.

"Celia, I want to talk to you. Oh, I know you don't want me to. And you must drink this first. You're frozen."

The cup was at her lips. Easier to drink than to struggle—the liquid was a hot auger boring into her frigidity.

"Now come into my room. I've made a fire there. I won't make you stay—" She pulled Celia to her feet. "You know I wouldn't bother you unless I had to—" Her voice trembled.

Celia allowed herself to be led to the door of her mother's room. There the light and gay color rose like a wall, and she turned in flight. But her mother closed the door quickly and pushed a chair near the small fireplace.

"You sit there." She snapped off the lights except for the little pink-shaded desk-lamp behind her, and dragged a wicker rocker to the other side of the hearth. Before she sat down she poked a few sticks under the blazing log.

Celia watched the fire. Complete emptiness possessed her.

"You see," began her mother, abruptly, as though continuing a conversation, "I have a sort of feeling that I ought to do penance—though I know that's nonsense. But it looks as if you had been tied up as an offering in my stead. So now I'm willing, eager, to say anything or do anything that will cut you loose. If he hasn't done it himself."

Celia's hands shut together in her lap.

"I have tried before, when I wanted to send you to college somewhere away from here. That scared him. He saw you getting free. Well, you didn't go."

Out of Celia's lethargy rose a thin ghost, a phantom of her life-habit, the justification of her father.

"He wasn't well. He needed an assistant."

"Yes. And that way he kept you from going off to college. And he kept even your work for himself. I had hoped there at least you might get away. The job of drawing-teacher in the schools isn't, one would say, heavy enough to take two persons' time."

Her tone was so tranquil, so undisturbed, that Celia lis-

tened; the things said became a piling up of tiny weights, scarcely felt at first.

"What I want to do, though, is to go back—much farther. You see, at the beginning he had me, just as he has you now. I was teaching here, in a primary room, when he came. I was quite young, inexperienced, and his polish, his coldness, his whole way was fascinating. But he couldn't let me alone. He didn't love me. I found that out soon enough after we were married. He hasn't ever loved anybody but himself. No, not even you, Celia. He thinks he has made you, that's all. That's why he was so mad this afternoon. He tried to make me over. I was—well, older than you—when he started." Mrs. Duryea smiled. "A good deal like one of those rubber balls children have, soft, all right. But he'd think he'd made a dent, and when he took his thumb away, out I'd bob. Then he was irritated. Frightfully. He didn't like my friends. Nor my way of doing things. Finally I thought that one day he'd simply cut me into shreds, boil me down, whatever you do to finish off a rubber ball! So I bounced out of his hand. Nothing else to do. I couldn't leave him—he had to have some one looking out for him, and then there was you. The trouble was, I was so busy bouncing back into work, away from him—that it was quite a while before I saw he had his hands on you. And then—" Celia felt her eyes touch her, wistfully, for an instant. "I didn't know how he had done it, but you didn't like me. I wonder whether you remember when you were quite a little girl, you decided—I suppose most children have such ideas—that you had some mystery about your birth. A foundling, or noble birth, or something. But you wanted to be his child. So you asked him—if I could be your real mother. Do you remember?"

Celia did remember.

"He told you your real mother had died. You almost believe it to this day!"

"But he wasn't lying!" The ghost came again, driving her into words. "He meant it figuratively. He thought I understood. He always treated me as his equal. He meant you had changed."

"He knew exactly how you took it. He told me of it, with

triumph! Think of it, Celia! And I— You wouldn't listen to me. I was outside your charmed circle. How old were you before you knew how he meant it? Old enough to believe him figuratively. So nothing changed. And he made fun of me because I kept a shop! What is there ridiculous about running a book-store? A good one, too. It made me free of him and so he had to cry it down. But Celia"—she gulped—"has he never told you—how much money from that shop he uses?"

Celia stared at her. The pressure of accumulating weights had pain for her now.

"I shouldn't tell you, perhaps—but it's all the rest of your life I'm trying to give you. I have thought what I could do—especially lately. For a long time I was just hurt because you turned against me. I didn't see his scheme—I suppose I hadn't patience enough. Not that he had a scheme at first. But there you were, soft, pliable stuff. He could make you what I wouldn't be, slave, admirer, wonderer at him. Oh, he must have seen it clearly to do it so well!"

"You have always been jealous of me!" Celia struck out in a gesture prompted by that ghost of defense.

"Oh—jealous! He's made you think that. If I could make you see— He wanted to be a super-person. His lameness—his lack of success—he meant to paint, you know— He had to have shelter, a place where he was that super-person. He couldn't have a shadow of a rival in it. What has he done to all the friends you might have had?"

"They couldn't stand comparison with him. He's not touched them!"

"What happened to Laura Welles? Nice, jolly girl. You didn't know I heard your father, the night he met her here for the third time! A little twist of a knife, straight into the friendship that had started! And that boy, last winter! And now—Ralph!"

Mary Duryea sighed. Between her eyebrows a triangle of tiny drops of moisture glistened. But her face, except for that triangle of suffering, kept its whimsical tolerance of mouth and eyes.

"I told Ralph to hurry up," she said, suddenly. "I hoped

he'd sweep you off before Philip came back. He did, too, almost! You were a different person! What could your father say about him? He's the finest, truest boy I ever knew. And Philip knows it! That is exactly why he forgot himself and raged at you. He was afraid. He hasn't done that for a long time—" She paused, reminiscently. "He used to talk to me that way occasionally. He's very sorry for it by now."

"Oh, don't! don't!" Celia flung herself around in her chair, hiding her face against her arm. The numbness, the lethargy, was stripped away; she came back, as from an anesthetic, into a white glare of anguish. Through her, tangled in the knot of devotion, had always run a thread of justice, too firm to break now. These things were true. He, her father, had himself attested to them.

Her mother's hand touched her shoulder, a friendly, human pat.

"There, Celia. That's all. I just wanted to say those things before you sent Ralph away."

Celia lifted her face; color and life drained out of it, leaving it piteous, blank.

"There's nothing left of me," she said, slowly. "I've tried just to be—what I thought he would like—because I thought it was beautiful and fine and perfect—and it's gone." Her hands dropped into her lap, palms upward.

Mary Duryea picked up the cold hands and held them, warmly.

"Nonsense, Celia!" Her eyes had a flare of loveliness. "You see, you've taken what was good in him—and there's much of it. He's given you his best." She flushed. "I guess—I have been jealous of that. It's only that I won't have him giving you more of his worst."

She bent to stir the fire; the sudden leap of flame sprayed her hair into soft light, touched with gold whimsical planes on forehead, cheek, and outstretched, steady hand.

Celia saw the lights shivered into prismatic edges through her own incredulous tears.

"And now"—Mrs. Duryea pushed back her rocker—"now I'm going to draw a warm bath for you—and you're going

straight to sleep. To-morrow's time enough. I don't know whether you care enough for Ralph to take him or not. Marrying lasts quite a while." She smiled. "But you will know."

Celia lay back in her chair, a curious listlessness on body and mind. Her mother had drawn the knife out of her wound and showed it to her, clean, no slightest rust of bitterness, strange warrant of healing. She gave herself up to warmth and light and the little bustle of her mother's coming and going.

"Here are your things." Her mother spread them on the chair beside her. "Everything's ready." She closed the door softly behind her.

Celia undressed slowly. The warmth of the fire flowed about her.

Presently, in her own room, unstartled, she saw her mother move out of the shadows near the window.

"Jump into bed and I'll open your windows."

She stood beside the bed, indistinct, just the lines of her bent head and shoulder showing, ineffably tender, valiant.

"Good night, Celia." Her hand reached out, touched Celia's arm. "Go right to sleep."

After a moment she had gone. Through the window came the spring wind, earthy, sweet.

All night Celia moved through tranquil pools of sleep, coming sometimes almost into troubled consciousness, and then dropping again into tranquillity.

When she woke the room was full of sunshine. Then, as though her waking let down the bars behind which the night had herded them, they rushed upon her fanged and clawed, cruel thoughts, images. She cowered. But under her eyelids flashed a quick picture of her mother, undaunted, standing in the shadow by her bed. She pushed herself erect. Whatever happened, she could at least face things. If she pretended not to be afraid—they might slink off.

She dressed, lingering a little with each motion. The ordinary demands of a day had lost their important meanings. The house was still. They had gone, her father and her mother. The day was strange, secret. At its core, hidden,

something which was hers, if she could work through to it, without fear.

She stopped at the door of her mother's room. The sunlight, in plashes on its chintzes and white woodwork, quivered over her like a poignant, ironic tune, not to be endured. Then something—a small bedroom slipper with its pink bow, perhaps—loosened the ache in her throat. She had been scornful! She had thought she wanted her life to be beautiful, fine; and all the time that clear, bright, simple room, and the woman living in it, had stirred derision in her, or pity!

Through warm, humble tears she looked down the stairs, toward the drawn curtains of the study. Behind them she almost heard her father drag his twisted foot, in shadows—

If she had come to hate him, she would still be bound to him! That thought came drifting up from the dark curtains and passed. She was sorry for him! Tears were on her cheeks now. "He's given you his best, always!" Her mother had said that!

Through her tears she saw the front door pushed open and warm light rush into the house. Ralph stood below her, peering about the hall.

"Celia!" he called, softly. Then he saw her.

For a moment she hung there above him.

"Shall I come after you?" he cried.

"No," she said, and her voice dropped clear, wondering.
"No. I'm coming—Ralph."

HIS SACRED FAMILY

WITH little swirls of sound released from durance—bodies pushing upward, feet thudding decorously, hymn book pages fluttering—the congregation rose for the last hymn. Constance gazed ahead, the corner of her mouth lifting in a faint curve as her only outer recognition that Lynn's thumb pressed hers under the cover of the hymnal.

"Sun of my so-ul, Thou Sa-a-viour dear—"

Constance did not sing. She heard, above the gray din of voices near her, the voices of her mother and John Barse, clear streaks of color over the ruck, her mother's voice green, water-clear, John Barse's purple, like deep water. By moving ever so little toward Lynn, she could see the choir loft, see her mother, a design in black and white. Triangles. Her white, pointed face, the long triangle of white net where her broadcloth jacket was pushed open, even a triangle of passive white hands. Queer that high and clear green shimmer could come from a design in black and white. She could not see John Barse; the shining pink baldness of Lynn's uncle, two seats ahead of her, roundly obscured John. That was like Lynn Holt's family, she thought, to shut from sight whatever they did not like. They were disturbed by John, for all he was Lynn's cousin and part of them.

Her mother was singing well to-night. Constance's thoughts escaped the slow rhythm of the hymn. "That's

because she is defiant at what I said." What was her mother seeing from the choir loft? Constance wondered whether those neat proper backs had prying, hostile eyes. Every one is talking about it, Lynn had told her. You should speak to your mother! My mother thinks so. She is terribly indiscreet, at least, seeing so much of John. Can't you drop her a hint? Constance sighed. She had dropped the hint, clumsily, just before her mother started for church. Her mother had laughed, and started down the stairs to where John Barse stood waiting for her. Then, halfway down, she had called back, "I told you if I sang in church there would be trouble, Connie. Be sure you grow fat! That's the real cause of their disapproval, all those good women! Don't stay young when you are nearing forty! Slim hips are a deadly sin, aren't they, John! And you're marrying into the Holts, Connie! Grow fat and respectable. That's your mother's advice."

Lynn drew the book from her hand. The voices had ceased, and the church was full of subdued movement and murmuring.

"Shall we wait for your mother, Constance?" Lynn held her coat for her, without the fleeting touch of fingers on her shoulder.

Constance shook her head. Without glancing at him, she knew just how he looked—his blue eyes worried, his sandy brows pulled together making one deep, abrupt wrinkle at the bridge of his nose, even his sandy hair somehow more erect and agitated.

"I hear your cousin is leaving us, Lynn." As they moved toward the aisle the seal coat in the pew ahead of them had turned. "We'll miss his voice in the choir. So nice to have him singing the few months he's stayed." Constance caught the quick dab the woman's eyes made at her. "He'll be missed in many ways, Mr. Barse will."

"Yes. He is going abroad. Business." Lynn cleared his throat.

Constance wanted to run, to thrust her way violently among the sleek fur-draped figures, and escape. Her impulse edged her to the door in advance of Lynn, so that she had

to stand for a moment on the steps, waiting for him. Her heart was beating dully; she could feel it under her chin. Oh, she had only imagined that the people were staring at her with curious eyes! Only read into casual glances the malice of that message from Lynn's mother, Madam Holt.

"You were in a hurry!" Lynn took her arm, and they went silently along the village street, the shrill squeak of dry snow under their feet.

"Dear Lynn," thought Constance, as the pulse in her throat slackened to the steady rhythm of their walk, "he's so honest it's as if he lived in a glass shell, and I could see into his very self." She glanced up at his square shoulder, his profile faint in the half light of the street, and suddenly she hugged his arm. His face swung around above her.

"You're not cross, then?"

She laughed. "At you? Oh, Lynn!"

"Wow!" He let out an explosive breath. "That's good."

"I know your mother made you promise to say that."

"Well." He hesitated. "I think there's some basis—"

"Don't let's argue about it again." Constance pressed her shoulder against his arm. "Such a little way home! I'd rather just love you."

"Anyway—" They were at a corner, where the street light made crisscrosses of shadows from the bare trees, like a net into which they walked. "Anyway, John is leaving town to-night. That ought to stop the talk."

Something in Lynn's square chin shutting on his words fired the girl.

"Why doesn't your mother blame him? Why is my mother to blame? We just were kind to him, a stranger, your cousin."

"I wish he'd never shown his face here! Your mother's a woman, and older, that's why—"

"Oh! Oh!" Constance drew away, rigid, from his arm. "They just waited till they had a chance to jump on her, all the old women in this town! Because she was pretty and different—and hadn't grown up here—and—"

"Constance, that isn't fair!"

"They've never liked her—any more than your mother

liked me! Oh, I know! She sent you away to college, to forget me! You are a Holt—and I? Nobody!"

"See here, that's all done with! I didn't forget you, did I?" Lynn stopped, and with a quick movement swung Constance into the circle of his arm. "We're going to get married next month, aren't we? And mother does like you. And I—Connie!"

For an instance they stood there. Constance felt his words blown warm on her forehead; she peered up at his familiar, substantial shape, massed darkly against the distant light. She shivered.

"Yes, Lynn." They went on quickly. "Sometimes I'm scared, I'm so happy. Scared of your mother, as I used to be when I was little. Scared to be so happy— Maybe that's why . . ." She laid her cheek briefly on the rough sleeve. "Let's not talk about it any more!" She slipped her gloved hand into his, and relaxed again into her thought, "Dear Lynn! Dear."

The house was dark. Lynn unlocked the door, turned on the light in the narrow hall, and kissed her soberly. "Good night. You're tired. I'll call you up to-morrow."

"Lynn!" Constance moved her fingers along his sleeve. "Let's run away, just you and me. Let's—" She pulled herself to tiptoe against him. "A desert island, no folks, nothing but us!" She shivered; perhaps the cold night air from his coat—"There are so many people here!"

"Silly old dear!" Lynn kissed her again, and for an instant she clung to him, her eyes closed. "They don't matter to us."

"You mean that, Lynn?" Constance stood away from him.

"Well, of course other people have to be considered."

"Oh, literal Lynn! I mean in the you and me part of life. No one outside of us could touch that—for me."

"You don't think anybody could touch my love for you!"

"Sometimes I am frightened. There are so many—your mother, your important relatives, your business. Oh, I'm bad and jealous of them all!"

"I guess you know where my heart is!" Lynn drew him-

self up so seriously that Constance's intensity dropped into a soft laugh.

"Yes, I do!" She pulled off her glove and pressed her hand against his breast, her fingers burrowing into the rough wool coat. "Right there, under my hand!"

He lifted her hand, and laid his lips on her wrist, a soft, devouring kiss, under which Constance felt her pulse singing, for a moment of delicate, tender happiness.

"Don't forget that!" He moved reluctantly to the door. "Good night, dear."

"Good night!" and Constance heard him crunch briskly along the walk. She heard other footsteps, and turned to run up the stairs, her softness gone into a hard thought, "Lynn wanted to hurry away! He was afraid they would come in before he had gone!"

In the upper hall she waited, her toe rubbing over the worn place in the runner, catching the coarse threads of the warp. Everything was shabby! Yes, John Barse had come in. She retreated toward her door at her mother's, "Ah, Constance must have sent her young man straight home. That's good. Come in, John."

Constance closed her door softly. "I'm going to bed," she thought. "Mother's wound up. She'll only make fun of Lynn if I am waiting for her. As she does when she is—upset. To-morrow John Barse will be gone. And in a few days father will be home." She was slipping her dress down from her shoulders, and stopped, as if her thought had brought her father visibly to the door. A little man, with bright restless eyes, a nervous high voice, a constant artificial manner of cheerfulness. He was on the road most of the time, salesman for retail-store supplies. Clearly she could see him, running a hasty tongue over his lip, rubbing his hands—that awful, deprecating good humor! Poor father! Constance had a queer flash of understanding. He brought his salesman's manner home, trying hopefully to "sell" himself in the face of her mother's shifting, uncertain moods.

"She's so much cleverer than we are," thought Constance, "and unhappier, too. Brrr, I'm cold." She hurried into her bathrobe, and sat in front of the chintz-covered dressing

table, brushing out her soft dark hair. "I look like mother, a little—" Her hands drew the flying cloud into smooth bands, framing the pale oval of her face, and she leaned forward to stare at her reflection. Gray eyes under long lids, short wistful upper lip—it was a serious face except for the whimsical upward fling of the fine dark brows. Impatiently she rose, her fingers moving quickly down the braid. "But I don't feel like her!"

When she had turned off the lights she hesitated a moment at the window before she let the shade spring up. Sometimes she was afraid of the pines outside! There they stood, the long, pointed black row, the nearest rising past her window. Lynn's pine trees. The corner of the Holt estate touched her father's lot—no, was divided from it by the wall of pines. For years Constance had looked out at them each night, and sometimes through their dark masses, had caught golden flickers of light from the windows of the Holt house. Only last fall that nearest tree, after years of straining toward her window, had reached it, touching it with a faint, slipping sound. She had been wakened by that touch night after night, until one night, when the fall rain beat down the pine smell and the wind drove the needles, she had leaned far out, trying to break the branch. She remembered her panic when, slipping, she had just caught herself against the sill and had lain there, the rain in her hair. She had tried to tell Lynn about her feeling. "I think they hate me! They stand between us! I think that tree tried to pull me out!" Lynn had laughed and said, "Silly girl! Pines have to grow." But he had told his gardener to trim the branches.

To-night they were very black and still, except for patches of old snow caught in the branches. Constance could see no lights. "Lynn is sitting in the library," she thought, "talking with his mother. He is telling her that he did as she asked. Told me that my mother was making herself conspicuous with John Barse, his cousin, a man years younger." She shivered. "I won't think that! I'll think—how surprised the pines will be to see me living on the other side of them, in that great house." With a little rush she pushed

the window high and flew into bed, the frosty air sweeping after her with the cold, clean, dark smell of the pine needles. "Dear Lynn!" She curled a hand under her cheek and slept.

A sound, faint as smoke, drew her abruptly out of sleep. Like a cry! She fumbled for her bathrobe. Still drowsy, she pushed her door open and clung to the balustrade, peering down, brushing a hand across her eyes. At the end of the hall, indistinct in the light which blurred through the portières from the living room, stood her mother and John Barse. "He's going," thought Constance. "I just heard them talking." But as she turned, something in the quiet, rigid opposition of the two held her. Then her mother laughed.

"Afraid?" Constance shrank from the vibrant voice. "I am not afraid!"

"Then come."

"There are other things besides fear to keep me."

Constance could see her mother lift her hands in a gesture implicit with struggle. John had not moved.

"Perhaps you think that next week or next month I shall not love you."

"Do I care about that! *Now* you love me!"

"You will come with me, Amy. So easy! Just walk out of this door with me, to-night. The boat sails at nine. To-morrow there'll be ocean between you and all this you hate so. Europe ahead of us, love—"

"John! I can't! I would only make you unhappy. And here—there is Constance."

"You've given your life to her. Now she has her Lynn. That's all she wants. She's not like you! What have you if you stay!"

"No, I won't go. I'm old!" She flung her arms wide, swaying backward, as if she fought against a vortex which was drawing her down.

"Old! You?"

Constance, straining wildly forward, saw him move between those wide flung arms, saw his dark head swoop downward, and could look no more. Her breath hoarse, she closed her door softly—as if they would hear her!—and stumbling on the cord of her bathrobe, felt her way toward

her bed. She heard, a thin wail creeping under the door and then expanding, filling the darkness, her mother's, "No! No! I can't!"

She crept into bed and hid her face. She pressed her palms over her ears until the blood pounded like slow drums.

Her mother! And she had laughed at Lynn. She had said, "My mother is fine. You don't understand her. She is generous, and reckless about—silly things. People don't like her, here. But she is all fine, my mother."

And John Barse! She had been afraid of him, when he had first come, last fall. He was like Mrs. Holt, Lynn's mother, more like her than her own son. Dark, lean, a kind of fierceness—his hooked nose and dark sharp eyes seemed wrought by his own spirit. Just as Lynn's mother made her feel. All her life she had stood out against Lynn's mother, because she had loved Lynn. Now when that fight was won—Lynn had won, through his steadfastness, and Mrs. Holt had given in—this man had come.

Constance sat up, trembling. She heard no sound except that of wind rising and the pines moving in long sharp swishes outside the window.

"Mother's always been unhappy." She could see the dark gesture of a bough. "But this is wicked! She can't run away—Mrs. Holt would hate me again. John is part of her family. And Lynn—"

She pushed aside the covers, thinking, "I must go down. I'll tell them it is wrong. John will laugh. Mother—she would listen to me."

She heard the door close with a sharp whine. She flung herself up on her knees. Slow, heavy, her mother's feet climbed the stairs, dragged past her door to the end of the hall. Constance pressed the blanket against her lips, stifling the choking cry. Her mother had not gone!

The night was bewildering, like a sluggish stream with drifting flotsam. The past floated along with jagged bits above the surface and the rest submerged in sleep or oblivion. Constance and Lynn, children, playing under the pines, his mother calling him home. She always called him home. Constance in the stormy rebellion of fifteen, crying out, to

her mother, "Well, Lynn says everybody thinks it's crazy for you to stand on a bridge and watch sunsets! Why aren't you like other mothers?" and her mother's reply, "So you want my sunsets, too, Connie? You'd like me to play bridge—not stand on one, is that it?" Lynn, her mother, her father, Lynn's mother—half-forgotten things—drifting along.

In the morning Constance stood at the head of the stairs, reluctant to go down. She was tired. The night clung to her like a heavy cloud.

"Oh, Connie!" Her mother stood below her, slender and crisp in green gingham. "Hulda wants your laundry. Bring it down, will you?"

At the foot of the stairs her mother took the bag from her hand.

"Hulda says we spoil you, letting you lie abed!" How clear and hard her mother's voice was! Last night couldn't be real, thought Constance. "But I told her that soon you would be living by system, rules, clockwork—everything we haven't in this house. And Hulda agreed. 'Let the pore thing sleep out,' she said. 'She'll have to get up betimes when she moves in with the old Madam.'"

Constance looked fleetingly at her mother. Hadn't she cared at all! Her lips were colorless and her long white eyelids had a nervous fluttering, but the girl's glance could find no sure note of tragedy.

"I didn't sleep well," she said, awkwardly.

"Your coffee is perking. I'll give this to Hulda."

Over her breakfast Constance heard her mother's voice, light, unemotional, giving directions to Hulda. With a faint resentment she felt that she had been dragged off a peak of intensity down on to the level of commonplace daily life. She never knew just what lay beneath the surface with her mother. Well—Constance stretched a little, into comfort. Good rolls. Her mother couldn't have cared seriously and be so ordinary this morning. Everything was all right. She could think about Lynn—or read the morning paper. She propped it against the percolator.

The clock on the mantel began to strike, its sweet hurried notes tinkling nine o'clock. Then the hall clock sounded,

deliberate and harsh. Constance lifted her eyes. Through the doorway she could see her mother standing in the hall, her face turned away. Something rigid in the straight, slender green figure caught at Constance's throat. Her first thought, swift and irrelevant, was about the green dress. Her mother liked soft flowing things of chiffon; that gingham was a concession to Constance's sense of morning propriety.

She saw one hand waver out and close about the edge of a step; she saw the cords of the white throat tauten into harsh, ugly lines. Nine o'clock! John Barse sailed at nine.

Constance shut her eyes until that clock had dragged to its ninth stroke. When she looked again, her mother had moved beyond the line of the door. The girl sat for a long time, motionless, her young mouth growing stubborn under her wide, pitying eyes. "There's nothing else she could have done," she thought, at last. "And there is nothing I can say to her. Nothing."

She heard the postman's shrill whistle, and immediately after, the opening of the front door. Her mother had been here in the hall all this time.

The door swung open.

"A note for you, Connie." Her mother flicked it to the table. "And a letter from Aunt Paul. She wants me to come for a few days."

Constance lifted her eyes from the sheet of gray paper with its sprawling uncertain old writing, to her mother's face. Her voice had dropped into a low vibrancy, disturbing. Her eyelids fluttered down over brilliant, dilated pupils.

"She's not sick?" Constance fumbled in the dark. Just the old aunt who had brought up her mother. What had happened?

"Not exactly. She's old. I haven't seen her since summer. You know—" Her mother rolled the sheet over a finger. "I think I'll go. You don't need me this week. The dress-maker isn't coming till next Monday."

"Why don't you?" Constance turned away, ostensibly to hang the checkered towel on the rack. "It would be a change." If she goes to Springfield she can get used to

his being gone—the girl's thoughts darted at the relief—and I can get used to knowing!

"Yes, it would." Under the sudden intent gaze Constance's eyes filled with tears. Another instant and she would have cried out. "I know all about it. Don't hate me because you gave him up! You couldn't have gone." But her mother added quietly, "Well, then, if you are sure you don't mind, I think I'll go this afternoon."

Just after luncheon, as they waited for the taxi, Lynn telephoned. Did Constance want to go to a movie after dinner?

"I don't know. I want to see you."

"You all right, Constance? You sound tired."

"Yes. I just thought I might like to stay here. Would you mind?"

"I should say not. Say, Connie—"

The clamor of the doorbell broke in on the whir at her ear.

"Oh, Lynn! I'm sorry—got to go—the taxi's here."

"Where you going?"

Constance smiled. That was one of Lynn's silly and adorable jokes, that loud, dominant air of possession.

"Just to the station, Mister. With mother." Silence. "Oh, Lynn, did you hear?" From the door her mother's voice, "Coming, Constance?" "Lynn!" What was the matter with that wire?

"Your mother is going away?" How blank and heavy his voice sounded.

"Yes. Just to Springfield. I'll tell you to-night. Good-by—"

As she stepped into the taxi beside her mother, she felt her face grow warm, and she stared uncomfortably through the dusty window. He hadn't liked it! Suspicious—of what! She twisted her gloves between her fingers. She had not thought of that. He meant that it looked queer, her mother's departure. As if she were running away. Not with John! He had gone. Just to hide—

"Your young man all right?" She felt an undertone of excitement in her mother's light words.

Then just a moment on the station platform.

"Shall I wire Aunt Paul you are coming?"

"Heavens no! A telegram is the yellow peril itself to her, old dear. I'll 'phone her from the station."

"You'll be back before father, won't you?" The cold winter sun touched her mother's face into luminous pallor; no sign of years there, except perhaps the faint crinkling at the outer corners of her dark eyes.

The train rumbled past them.

"I suppose so. I'd like never to come back." Mrs. Sprague relinquished her bag to the porter. "But I don't like Springfield, either, do I?" She smiled at Constance, a hesitant, wistful smile, and the girl bent toward her, half breathless, expectant. But the porter shouted, "All 'bo'd," and with a faint shrug, Mrs. Sprague set her foot on the step.

"Good-by, dear," Constance lifted her face, and her mother's lips trembled briefly against hers. Then with a rush, the woman vanished into the car. Constance had a last glimpse of her moving along the aisle, a blurred impression of the white curve of her cheek against the long drooping feather.

Lynn came in rather late and apologetic.

"Mother got to talking—but you said you didn't want to go out, anyway, didn't you?"

"I don't care. Brrr! You're cold." Constance slipped out of his arms back to her seat under the lamp. She gathered her sewing into her lap, soft gray silk, with a patterned border of small, transparent beads. Her fingers made flashing, uncertain stabs among the tiny, slipping beads.

"Nice picture, Connie!" Lynn's wicker chair crackled as he settled himself near her.

Constance fumbled with a bead that wouldn't slip over the needle. She saw uneasiness in the way he swung his foot; she knew that if she looked up she would find that abrupt, harassed wrinkle between his sandy eyebrows. With a faint sigh she pushed away the box of beads; they rustled like water.

"What is it, Lynn?" She shook out the silk, glancing at him over its shimmer.

"That's good. Put it away. You never pay any attention

to me if you sew. What's that?" He turned his head quickly, at voices somewhere in the house.

"Hulda. She was expecting her sister to come in."

"Oh." He sank back. "It sounded—like your mother."

"Scarcely." Constance was curt.

"No. Of course not."

The moodiness Constance had fought all day swirled again around her. I won't talk about mother, she thought. I won't! She sought hastily for something.

"Shall I get that curtain stuff to-morrow? I'm going into Boston, I think."

"Oh, yes. I meant to speak of that." Lynn pulled his fingers along the arm of his chair, stopping to snap a loose end of wicker. "I meant to speak of it."

"Doesn't your mother like the samples?" Constance asked quietly.

"She thinks they are pretty, very pretty. But—" He gave his upper lip an extra twist over the words, a grimace of embarrassment. "She wonders whether it is wise to change the color scheme. For temporary quarters, you know. It would look startling from the outside. Right next her parlor windows. Sort of bright, don't you think? If we were going to live there always—"

Constance's white lids dropped over shining hostility.

"If you care about them—I mean, if they make much difference—I thought just curtains, you know—" Lynn stammered.

"Just curtains, of course."

"Another year, in our own house—"

"Sometimes—" Constance tried vaguely to stop the words, but out they pushed—"sometimes I think next year can never come. I think I am trying to marry your mother, not you at all! I think—"

"Constance!" Lynn jerked forward in his chair.

"To-night, as I waited for you, I thought—his mother is talking to him. Something she doesn't like. Some day it will be me she doesn't like. And Lynn will say, 'Just my wife, of course. If you don't mind, Constance—'"

"Constance, that isn't fair! It's not like you, Connie!"

Constance flung up her hand to hide quick tears, and Lynn with a lurch of his chair was close to her, reaching for her hand.

"Constance, look at me!" His face wavered, grew enormous, then blurred; as the tears rolled down her cheeks, his blue eyes were clear again, disturbed, steady. "That's my girl. You know better than to talk that way. Go get the old curtains. I don't care if they do look queer outside."

"It's not curtains." Constance gulped. "It's always something, and she has her way."

"Now, Connie." Lynn's grasp was warm and firm about her quivering fingers. "You know I just want her to be happy. But I love you!"

Constance was somber.

"Suppose that some day—her being happy meant that she didn't want me to marry you. What then?"

"Stuff and nonsense." Lynn shifted uneasily, and Constance saw his eyebrows bulge over his frown. "Now, take these curtains. I gave in easy because she was worried. That's all. She's not so young, you know, and she has set ideas."

"What was she worried about?" Constance felt a shiver contract her skin like a cold breath. "No, tell me! I think I know."

"She didn't like your mother going away. Not to-day."

"What business is it of hers!" Constance pulled her hands violently from Lynn's grasp.

"She didn't like the looks of it."

"How does it look?" Constance was on her feet, her own anxiety running as fuel to her anger. "How does it look for mother to go to Springfield to see Aunt Paul?"

Lynn rose slowly, his face flushing.

Constance stared at him, her eyes dark.

"You see!" she cried softly. "They don't matter to us, but they make me say things to you. Oh, Lynn! We've waited so long. We'll wait too long!" She was clinging to him, her face on his shoulder. "Lynn, take me away! Tonight. Let's not wait—until it's spoiled."

"There." His arms held her close. "You're just kind of tired."

Constance sighed and looked up at him. She could see him struggling for words, comforting, banal, easy words.

"I've got to go off for a few days, too." His hand touched her hair gently. "When I come back you'll feel better, what?"

"Where, Lynn?" Her hand clutched at his sleeve.

"Connecticut, Philadelphia. Factory business. Got to see some of the directors."

"Lynn!" Constance stretched up, her arms about his neck. "Lynn, take me with you!"

For an instant, as he held her there, suspended, she felt she had driven herself through him, like fine wire. His lips were harsh against hers. Then his arms grew slack.

"How could we, Connie?"

"I don't know! Any way! The town hall—where do people get married in a hurry? They do!"

"We couldn't." His voice was stern, as if his own brief flame had alarmed him. "It would be foolish, with everything planned. Undignified."

"Yes. Foolish." Constance moved away from him, her arms limp at her sides. "It would look queer." She laughed.

"You shouldn't suggest such things." He followed her, but she would not lift her face. "I might do it!"

"No, you wouldn't."

"Well, some one has to have some common sense."

"I wonder. All these years I've loved you, Lynn, common sense has sat right on my love! Holding it under—so it couldn't grow. We've waited so long—for common sense."

"Constance, dear!"

"Oh, I know!" she broke into his protest. "I'm unreasonable. But I am afraid—we may wait too long."

"But it's only two weeks now, Connie. Good Lord! do you suppose I don't want you?" He seized her shoulders; Constance felt his cheek on her hair. Suddenly she was laughing, softly.

"There!" She choked a little. "Poor Lynn! I'm bad to tease you when I know—it wouldn't do."

"Is there something back of this—you're worried about?"

"No. No sense in it." Constance sighed with laughter. "Kiss me, Lynn, and run home before I disgrace myself—any more."

When he had gone she stood for a time where he had left her. The reading lamp threw softened light on her face, making a strange mask, catching in relief on all the oblique, downward planes of chin, cheekbones, eyelids. And the mask was fear.

Presently Hulda's feet clumped up the back stairs. Constance stirred, bent to turn off the light.

"I am foolish." Her lips formed the words deliberately. "Nothing is wrong. John Barse is miles out on the ocean. Mother is with Aunt Paul. And Lynn—why, Lynn just kissed me and went home. I won't be frightened!" Her voice was a thread of defiance in the darkened room.

Two days later Constance unlocked the door and let herself into the dark, empty house. It was Hulda's afternoon and evening out. Constance let her packages slip to the floor as she reached for the letters on the hall table. Mrs. Henry Sprague. That was from father. Miss Constance Sprague, from Lynn. Not very thick! And a third, in the black, abrupt writing of her mother. She would wash off the city grime and have the letters for company at her solitary dinner.

Lynn's first. Just a note. He had decided to leave the Pennsylvania trip till later. Part of their wedding tour. They could stop at Philadelphia on their way south. So he would be home earlier than he had expected, perhaps as soon as his note. With haste and much love, Lynn.

Constance let her finger tips rest against his name, and her eyes dreamed a little. Dear Lynn! How foolish she had been, that evening, bothering him.

As she ran her finger under the flap of her mother's letter, she noticed the postmark. New York. Hastily she drew out and unfolded the sheets.

DEAR CONSTANCE,—Whether or not I deserve a hearing, I mean to ask for one. I didn't intend this. Not now. I meant to wait until you were safe from any effect of my actions. I should have known that the Holt tribe was so numerous

that nowhere could I escape them. And now that I have been seen, I might as well go on. You yourself will admit I am done for.

I honestly thought John had sailed that morning. I fought all night, minute by minute, until it should be nine o'clock. If I had known in time I might have fought a little longer. But how would you act if you went to your execution, and found your head still on! His letter came too quickly after I thought I was through. He had canceled his sailing and come on to New York. I could reach him until Wednesday, when he would leave.

What I planned in all sincerity was just to see him once more. It seemed so plausible, with Aunt Paul's letter right there. I thought no one would know, and I could then grow old and die with one golden day in my life. I thought it couldn't harm you. That little hotel seemed safe enough. And then to see old Mamie Barse and her dried-up daughter staring at us! No way to shut their mouths. You have heard the scandal before this reaches you, I know. So you see I might as well go on with John. I can't be sorry. Not for that. I am sorry it happened this way.

I'll write your father. It won't make much difference to him. I know he'll divorce me decently, so I can make John an honest man. And when you have married Lynn, you may forgive me for loving. I meant to go away as soon as you married. I have tried, Connie, to stay respectable as long as it would touch you. Don't let them bully you about me. Disown me! I want you to be happy, too—

At a sound in the hall Constance lifted her head slowly. She stared through the doorway. That slender figure, rigid, groping with one hand for support, the taut agony of denial in the line of throat and head! The figure moved, blurred, came toward her. Not her mother. Lynn, hatless, his sandy hair bristling, his upper lip twisting grotesquely about his words.

"Good God! What a mess!" He strode toward the table, opposite Constance. "What a frightful mess!"

"You've heard so soon," Constance's words were distant, wondering.

"Heard! All the relatives in town are at the house pow-wow! Worst scandal the family ever faced." He dropped into a chair, his hands clapping violently on the table. "How could you, Constance! Telling me—why, you said they were just fools, the women, talking about her. You meant my mother, too! And all the time—you even helped her get away."

"Oh!" Constance stared, her fingers rubbing over the pages of the letter. "You think that?"

"If you had only told me!" Lynn ground one fist into his other palm. "I could have stopped them. Your mother! My cousin! Why, the town will never be through talking about it."

"What affair is it of theirs? Or ours?" Constance pushed unsteadily to her feet, and retreated slowly until she had backed against the window. She couldn't breathe, sitting there. Outside was the slip, slip, slop, sl-slip of snow melting, dripping from the great pine trees. Lynn had risen, his face brick red.

"You think it's all right, then! Fine!" He strode around the table toward her so abruptly that Constance moved her hands to her breast, palms outward, in a faint gesture of protection. "That's what you meant, the other night! About going with me—You knew this would come out. You wanted to be safe."

"Yes, I knew this would happen." Her white eyelids folded down, shutting out his angry, bulging eyes. "I didn't know just how. That doesn't make any difference. You don't have to marry me. You're quite free. I couldn't marry you! Live in the house with that old woman, your mother. Hear her thinking! Like a hawk, circling, waiting for a chance to pounce. She would say to you, 'What can you expect of the daughter of such a woman? Blood will tell!' Oh, she has already said that to you! I can see it." Constance had seen; just a flicker of admission in the midst of his fumbling, confused anger.

"You sound as if we were to blame! As if we ought to be ashamed instead of—"

"You think I should be ashamed? You'd like me to cry and be humble and..." Constance turned away; the winter night, beyond the window, seemed to lay chill fingers on her cheek and throat; she heard the sl-slip of the melting snow beneath the pines. "You'd better go, Lynn," she said, quietly. "Go tell them, your mother and the rest, the town, that you aren't going to bring that woman's daughter into the sacred family."

"I haven't asked you to break the engagement." Lynn retreated a step; his truculence had a note of bewilderment. "I felt you hadn't played fair."

"You didn't even have a doubt, did you?" Constance was motionless; only her voice reached out, living, with the leaping rhythm of a flame. "You didn't wonder what I felt. You were sure. Listen, and I will tell you how I feel. Not ashamed. I have done nothing. My mother—for years I have seen her made wretched, by talk; by what people said of her. Because she was different. Gossip! Before she married she sang on the stage, and so she must be—well, you know what they have said, in this little, cruel town. And—of this I am ashamed—I have been on the side of the town, critical, trying to make her over, until I built a wall between us. I might have helped her. I didn't. I think she has gone now as much because of things that people said as because she loved John Barse. Your mother! The Holts are important, aren't they? It was such a pity you should take a fancy to me! But perhaps I wasn't like my mother. That was what they said, wasn't it? And I wanted people to think that of me. I wanted to be circumspect and conventional and respectable. But I loved you. I thought you were just and fair and fine. Then I began to be afraid. I was growing up and I did not know it. My fear was truth, and I have seen it for the first time to-night. The town has made you like itself. You don't know what I mean, do you!" Constance faced him. "You came to-night, believing all they said of me. All the worst. In spite of love. Your mother has won out."

"It isn't what she said! It's you, Constance! What you've said and done. If you can explain, for God's sake, do it! Instead of standing there talking as if I'd done something." He tugged at his collar, thrust his hand violently over his hair.

And Constance, standing so close to that abrupt gesture, had a strange moment. Her self had fled. Her hands, her lips, her throat, her breasts, were sentient, conscious beings, things of will and aching memory. Her hands wanted to touch his face, to feel the firm, warm, familiar contour, to pull him down, down, until her lips had their way beneath his mouth, hard, demanding. Her hands had floated upwards, fingers curling in their intensity, when he spoke again. With his voice, her hands stopped, clenched against her heart, and slowly, reluctantly, her self gathered up and integrated all those separate, clamorous wills.

"You must see that I was justified. Do you think I wanted to believe you had tricked me? That you could lie? Suggesting that we run off! Maybe you thought that would sidetrack attention from your mother. What else can I think?"

"Nothing else." Constance's hands drifted down, empty of desire. Her eyes strained with queer wonder; could this be Lynn! This harsh, flushed face, with the twisting cruel mouth! "You must believe what you like." Her voice lagged.

"You can't explain, then?"

"I could explain and explain, and you couldn't hear my loudest word, because other voices make such din between us."

"I don't believe you ever loved me! Acting like this!" Lynn seized her wrists, swung her arms out in a wide arc. Constance swayed away from his rough breathing, away from his jerking eyelids.

"Let me go! Believe that too, if you can!" She fell back against the window frame as he released her. "There's no use talking. Go tell them you are free. You don't have to marry me. Let them say—of course he wouldn't marry her!"

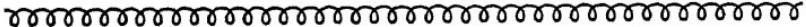
Taking her into his family after what happened! Good riddance!"

"I haven't asked to be released."

"You want that, too! That little sop—to your pride." Constance laughed, her soft, wistful upper lip a thin line of crimson. "You may have it! I won't marry you. Now go home!"

He wheeled and started across the room. His coat brushed a letter from the table. He stooped mechanically for it. Constance's hand pushed against the cry which quivered at her lips. Was it her mother's letter! If he should read it—But with an abrupt motion he tore the sheet across and the pieces fluttered behind him. One whirled to Constance's feet. "With love, Lynn." His own note. Then she heard his steps scrunching into the soft ice as he hurried past the house.

She slipped to her knees, her head against the window sill. Outside the slip-sl-slop came more infrequently, as the night grew colder. Suddenly the clock on the mantel whirred and hurried its tinkling strokes. Nine o'clock.



PLAYBOY

THE sounds of morning hurry nibbled at the edge of Gregory's sleep; feet clomping on the stairs, a baby's *wah-wahing*, voices, doors.

"Can't let you sleep." He dragged the comfortable over his ears until only an untidy lock of dark hair marked the end of the long cocoon.

"Greg-ory!" The cocoon wriggled. "Greg-or-y!"

"Yes." A practiced arm lunged out from cover, seized a shoe and dropped it sharply on the floor. "Yes. Coming." Then quiet again, until a rude hand shook the cocoon, pulled at the tousled hair, dragged the boy clear of the comforting oblivion of sleep. "You must get out of bed this instant. You'll be late again."

"Leggo my head, then." Gregory pulled away from his mother's fingers, sat up yawning. "What time—gee-gosh, why didn't you call me when I said to!" He thrust a long leg out of bed.

"I did." His mother waited at the door until the second leg appeared. "If you'd ever get to bed at a decent hour, you wouldn't be so dead the next morning. Now you'll have to rush—"

"Ye-ah." Gregory stopped beside her, wiggling his chin softly on her dark, curly hair. "Seem's if I'd heard you say that. Now you run and get my brekkust, that's a nice little

girl." Her perplexed frown smoothed away as she looked up at the thin, sleepy face above her.

"Well, you never listen to anything."

"Too busy." Gregory slammed the door of the bathroom. An instant later he angled over the stairs to shout after her, "You ironed that silk shirt for me?"

"Greg, please!" The round pink face of Alice, his sister-in-law, shone up at him. "The baby! Sh!"

Greg wheeled into the bathroom again, grunting disgustedly. An interim of splashing, banging of drawers, and he was down the stairs three steps at a stride, his coat over his arm.

"Where's the shirt, Mims?" He stood by the kitchen window while his mother adjusted the cuff links.

"You might have your shirts done at the laundry." Alice rattled the breakfast dishes, her firm round figure eloquent of disapproval. "Your mother hasn't even had her breakfast, having to do that up for you. Silk shirts to work!"

"You should consume yourself with worry." Gregory adjusted his tie, yanked on his coat. "Nice pretty overalls like Frank, eh?" His fingers shoved crumpled papers deeper into the outside pocket of the coat, and a line between his dark brows showed deeply for a second.

"Now, Greg." His mother shoved him into the dining room.

"Well, Alice can leave me alone." His white teeth crunched busily at the toast while his mother hovered from kitchen to dining room, with fresh coffee, eggs. "Any mail yet?" He pushed the letters out of sight in a pocket with the briefest inspection. None from Mina. Well, she might have sent it to the store.

"I guess you know what they are." His mother sat opposite him, troubled. "Greg, I wish—"

"Now, Mims!" He was on his feet again, dashing for cap and overcoat. "Say—" He beckoned to her ingratiatingly and she followed him into the little hall. "Mims, you're a good sport. Could you lend me a tenner? Mina's coming back to-day and I'm stony."

"Greg!" But he saw her hand close protectingly over the

pocket in her blue house dress. "I had to pay Alice your board last week and this."

"You'll get it back, you know." He tapped one toe briskly, his dark eyes beseeching her. "All the Christmas joy left me strapped. Just till Saturday." His arm crept over her shoulders and his fingers pried at her hand. "Have to give Mina a treat." He had the bill in his own pocket. "That's a nice mother."

"If you'd only have a nice girl, one who'd make you want to settle down—"

"They don't come nicer than Mina, Mims."

"She isn't a home girl, Greg. She's used to money—"

"Yeah." Greg's mouth looked grim. "What she makes herself. She's smart."

"Too smart. These modern girls—"

"Is Gregory coming home for lunch to-day?" Alice stood just behind his mother. How much had she heard?

"Yes, he is." Gregory pecked at his mother's cheek. "Bye." He rushed down the street, his coat flapping in the sharp January wind, his heels crunching bits of ice.

Lucky he'd got that ten-dollar bill. He'd left his car at the garage last night, with two flats. Old Mike wouldn't let him have it, curses on his stingy heart, without hard, cruel cash. Gregory whistled softly as he swung onto the clattering street-car. Mina'd pucker her face into that little grin of hers all right if he didn't have the ole bus when he met her train. Course, he could say engine trouble. But he couldn't fool Mina.

He yanked a handful of letters from his pocket and thumbed them. Bills. No use opening them. The grand total was bad enough if you didn't know it. His fingers twitched over them as if they ached to tear them in bits, scatter them over the dirty street and forget them. But he pushed them out of sight into his trousers pocket. If he could get hold of a few hundred—say five. That ought to clear him up. A paltry five hundred between him and comfort. His thin, handsome face drew into somber lines. Hang his luck, anyway!

Pretty little doll-face across from him, with the come-

hither look in the blue eyes peering at him under the mixing-bowl hat. Gregory flung an arm negligently along the back of his seat. Poor little thing, how disappointed she'd be if he should tell her she couldn't stir a ripple in his shirt-front. They were all alike, eyes under hat-brims, all except Mina. Funny, wasn't it, how he couldn't work up any interest in them?

The street-car jangled its way into the business streets.

Gregory dropped to the ground as it slowed and dodging the random eccentricities of small-town traffic, stopped at the corner cigar store.

"How's." He held one finger up. "What's new?"

The boy behind the counter tossed him a package of cigarettes.

"What would be, here?" he grunted.

Gregory extracted a cigarette, leaned above the lighter.

"Say, Bill." He held his ten-dollar bill by one corner. "You wouldn't ruin this for me this time of day, would you? I'll be in this noon." And expertly, before Bill could answer, he was again on the street. Time he was at the store. But his long stride broke in front of a window. Gee, that was some coat! He flung back his shoulders as if they carried the raccoon pelts with assurance. Himself at the wheel of his low car, the striped fur bulking all over the seat, Mina squeezed in beside him.

No harm to dash in and ask Dickey the price. Only last week Dickey had said there'd be bargains after the holidays.

Scarcely fifteen minutes later Gregory emerged through the swinging doors of the department store. His stride was superb. At his knees the fur coat flapped open, turning its plaid lining to the wind. Good old Dickey! He'd taken ten dollars down. To be sure, Gregory had to find forty more within a day. Then the rest would be easy, once a month. Dickey was a rare old scout. Letting him have it at a spring figure in January. It would have been inane folly not to snap it up. Gregory peered with a bland mouth and brightened eyes at the distorted reflection of himself in shop windows. Pity to go inside and take it off. He stood a moment in front of the "Men's Own Shop," staring at the

chaste display of socks and neckwear. Then the dull green curtain of background parted down the middle, substituting for his own reflection the sallow, long face of Thomas B. Wright. The eyelids flew wide at the sight of Gregory, who stirred into a swift entry of the shop.

"I see," said Thomas. "You just inherited a million from a great-aunt in the old country and so you ain't working for me any more."

"Aw, cut the wits." Gregory grinned at him. "Say, it hit you in the eye, didn't it?" He viewed himself in the oval counter mirror, incompletely. I picked it up at a great bargain."

"On an ash-can?" Tom watched Gregory's reluctant peeling off of the coat.

"A fellow really has to have a fur coat," began Gregory. "Riding around in all sorts of weather. Saves undertakers' bills."

"Sure." Tom hefted it. "Some of us wear red flannel, but we ain't all rich. Well, I'm glad you deigned to come in to see me."

Gregory cuffed at him, carried the coat with a kind of subdued reverence to the coat room at the rear of the shop, glancing at the table which served Tom for office.

"Any mail for me?"

"She didn't write, Greg. She's forgotten her little boy."

Greg shrugged. Two days without a letter from Mina!

"Say." Tom had followed him. "Got your bus here? There's a box for us at the freight office."

"Mike's got it." Gregory was arranging a disordered box of wool hose. "You're welcome to it." He looked up, his face genial. "Here's the key. You run around and help yourself."

"I'd like to get the stuff this morning. Wooley's got a new display in his shop, and if we don't break something—"

"Toddle along, then." Gregory thrust his key-ring into Tom's fingers.

When Tom, in his last year's belted sports coat, had closed the door, Gregory slapped his hand smartly against his thigh. That wasn't bad. They'd make Tom cough up

to get the bus. He'd take it out, and then it would be out. Gregory had wondered how to replace that ten dollars. Bus and fur coat—he'd give Mina a reception she'd remember. Poor ole Tom, tied up with a wife and two kids so he didn't dare change a nickel. He'd had a flivver once till the rear fell out and he sold it for junk. That was what marriage did for a man.

Gregory polished the plate glass of the cases. A woman came in for a linen handkerchief, a birthday present, and Gregory, by a tactful display of a corner of pongee silk in his coat pocket, doubled her expenses. That was one reason Tom put up with him. "You're so confoundedly ornamental, Greg," he would growl. Well, he could sell stuff. Tom ought to give him a raise.

He looked up into a bullish, strange face thrust over the counter. "You G. McVickar?" Gregory admitted it. "I got a little bill here." The stubby fingers spread papers on the counter, smearing the polished glass. "Tailor. Item, balance of forty-four dollars. Two years old. Credit Emporium. Item, balance, of sixty-two dollars on furniture unpaid." The stubby finger pointed at a third, a fourth.

"Just leave them with me and I'll see to 'em." Gregory tried to pick up the papers but the thick fingers held them fast.

"My clients say they write you without reply."

"What you got to do with it?" A little nerve in Gregory's cheek began to twitch and he put his hand over it. Mustn't let the fellow see.

"I'm handling these accounts. You going to settle?"

"Tell your clients it's a poor way to keep a customer!"

"Mabbe they don't want to keep your kind of customer, see?" The man thrust his chin farther across the counter. "Suppose you settle now."

"It isn't convenient." Gregory was elegant, distant. "If you leave the bills—"

"Gimme something toward them and I'll see what I can do."

Gregory's hand plunged into his pocket. The man waited. Greg crumpled unopened envelopes.

"Now see here, bo." Gregory dropped his grand manner, leaned on elbow on the counter. "You know how it is, just after Christmas, don't you? Give a fellow a little rope, can't you?"

"Broke, eh?" The man nodded. "Your boss in?"

"He's got nothing to do with it." Gregory dropped his voice ingratiatingly. "I'll see you by Saturday, with a fat roll."

"This is serious, young fellow. These folks"—he thrummed on the papers—"need their money. You got something of them. Now you got to cough up. That's all. If you don't, there's ways of making you."

"You can't squeeze a stone." Gregory shied away from the threat. "Have a heart. By Saturday, I said."

"The Credit Emporium instructs me to get the furniture."

"The fools can have it! And the tailor can have his clothes, all but the seat of the pants." Gregory's face was scarlet.

"Now, sonny, we know a thing or two about you. I'll wait till to-morrow. You don't want real trouble, do you?"

"Fine way to do business!" Gregory was shouting now. "Any firm works on credit."

"I don't suppose you get enough here to pay to garnishee your wages. I'll be in to-morrow. To-morrow, remember."

He lumbered out of the door, the papers in his fist. Gregory saw the figure wobbling in a blur before his angry eyes. Good Lord, how did they expect a fellow to live, anyway! It wasn't as if he didn't intend to pay. To-morrow? Forty-four dollars, sixty-two dollars, a hundred dollars; the fur coat. His mind began an agile hurdle-race catching its toes, leaping dollars, sprawling in the dust. Heat of desperation floated into his head, burning his eyelids, drying out his throat. Money—oh, hang money! The cash register gleamed suddenly visible. Gregory stared at it. Money. It wasn't as if he was a thief. Never was enough there, anyway. His hand touched the keys with a curious, inquiring gesture.

"Hi, Greg!" Tom's shout drew him out to the street. There stood his roadster, shining nickel, bright scarlet paint.

Old beauty! Tom was struggling with the cords which held a box on the running-board. "Give us a hand."

Gregory managed to squint at the pointer of the gasoline float at the rear. Yes, Tom had had the tank filled. Good old Tom!

They carried the box to the rear of the store. Tom handed the key-ring to Gregory. "Mike made me cough up four-fifty for you," he said tentatively.

"He did?" Gregory was busy with hammer and prying bar. His voice came indistinctly between blows. "Skinflint! I'll settle with you. Here, yank that board, will you?"

The rest of the morning Gregory threw himself with concentrated industry into unpacking, checking off stock, marking price labels, planning a new window display, a new ad. Sober, cautious Tom gazed admiringly at the rough sketch Greg made for the ad.

"Wish I had your imagination," he sighed.

Gregory's face looked gaunt as he bent over the counter, arranging goods. "Wish I had less." Enough less not to see himself dragged into court, made a fool of by paltry shopkeepers, humiliated before Mina.

At noon he stood a moment beside his new coat, his fingers digging into the stiff fur. He'd have to tackle his brother for a loan. Better not to wear the coat. Then he thrust his arms into it and strolled out to his car. He could hide it when he came near home. The quiet hum of the engine lifted him instantly out of the dust of his hurdle-race. He swung the car easily through traffic, full of an easeful thrill at his awareness of himself lounging there behind the wheel, fur-coated, masterful, commanding respectful admiration from pedestrians, from ordinary drivers of less spectacular cars. He rounded a corner onto a main boulevard, stepped on the gas and lived for a brief spell in a warm, delightful world. Then, around another corner, he stopped at the curb. The street had no spectators as he removed the fur coat, folded it carefully, slipped it into the rear compartment and locked the cover upon it. His old coat was too tight, shabby at pocket edges and button-

holes. He had a sense of virtue in his abstemiousness as he drove the few blocks to the house.

Frank was not there. He had telephoned to say he couldn't get away easily. Greg ate in hurried silence, the baby *gooin*g at him from its high chair until he laid down his fork and lifted a cautious finger to touch the soft cheek. "Funny little kid." The baby seized his finger, waggled it. "Like your ole uncle, eh?"

Mrs. McVickar watched them, her eyes misty.

"If you'd only find a nice, homey girl, Greg," she sighed, "instead of Mina. Some one who'd make you want to get a home."

"Yeah!" Greg pulled his finger out of the baby's grasp. "Watch me! I've seen enough."

"I pity the girl that gets Greg," said Alice as she left the dining room.

"Some don't feel that way!" shouted Greg after her. He stretched, looked at his watch and rose. His mother was in a good humor but he'd touched her once. No use trying the same thing again. What was she saying?

"A man came here asking for you. I told him where you worked. Did you see him?"

"Uh-huh." Gregory had seen him, all right.

"What did he want?"

"Just a li'l business. So long. I won't be here for dinner."

Again in his car, he hesitated. He'd have to go to the factory to see Frank. It would be too late when he got in to-night. Part of that bill Frank ought to help pay, anyway. Greg's wedding present to him, that furniture. Three years ago! Stuffed chairs and mahogany lamp. Alice had liked them. Greg had pleased her that time, all right. Threatening to carry them off after all he'd paid on them! Robbers!

Well, he'd tackle Frank, then. He'd pay him back. Frank was almost as bad as old Tom lately. Thinking about pennies.

Most girls wanted to hustle a fellow into harness. Mina was different. His mother didn't like her much. Too independent. She wasn't hunting for a bread ticket. Why, she made more right now than he did! Some day when

he had lots of money he'd make her marry him. She wasn't in any hurry. Most women wouldn't let a fellow alone. They wanted to make him over. Mina just took him—as far as she would. Mina—drawing funny little sketches of him, or of children; teaching drawing to children; selling her sketches. He'd had a hard time making her like him. But she'd been awful sweet before she went home for Christmas. Ah, the times they'd had! She was a rare little sport, his Mina. And more. The medley of broken images and feelings which meant Mina went humming softly through his blood, beating in his heart, in a vague chaos of tenderness.

He stepped on the gas, and as the car responded with a smooth pull up the tricky little hill, Greg felt a similar surge of power in his own veins. Pretty classy, the way that engine would take every drop of gas without a throb. He drove with a flourish into the main entrance of the factory.

"Hi, Greg! How's the boy!" The one o'clock shift was just coming in as Greg made his way to the employees' entrance. Greg knew many of the mechanics, although the dark, foreign faces were strange to him; day-laborers from the edges of the town.

"Some little car you drive." That was chunky little Andy. He and Greg had been in camp together. "Going to let us make you a special sport job, eh?" Andy grinned at him.

"No, you egg. I'm ordering one from the other side. No domestic jobs for me in the future." Greg strolled up the winding stairs. Andy was a good scout, but slow.

"Where's Frank?" Greg shoved open the door of the assembling room, full of roar and dust and pale light filtering through high windows. The foreman jerked his fist toward the ceiling and Greg climbed higher. Frank must have some engines on the blocks.

"Lo, Greg." Frank nodded to him across the vibration of an engine bolted on a heavy block, humming in stationary impotence.

"Say, she sounds fine!" Greg bent over the shining engine.

"All right now." Frank snapped off the ignition. "Had a lot of trouble with this batch. Cranky. Had to rush 'em through, too."

He came around the engine to his bench under the window, dropping his tools, wiping his fingers on a bunch of grimy waste. Shorter than Greg, heavier, older.

"Well, what's eating you?" His eyes were shadowed with weariness.

Greg stared at him a moment. No easy way. He might as well spit it out.

"Frank, I got to have some kale. I hate to bother you, and you know how all-fired awkward it is for me, asking—"

"Same story. Ought not to be awkward for you, with all your practice." Frank's jaw looked grim, over-paternal.

"If you want to be nasty!" Greg lounged against the bench. "It's just a temporary loan. But I'm pressed hard."

"Heavy expenses?" Frank thrust his hands into his pockets. His serious frown was touched into a grimace by a smear of grease. "So many people to support and all."

"If you won't help me, say so!" Greg felt that twitching under his eye again. "Only"—he gulped—"do you want to see me in jail?"

"You couldn't spend so much there."

Greg wheeled, a ripple of anger down his legs, into his toes. Humiliating, the way folks treated a decent request. He took one long stride toward the door and then stopped. He couldn't afford to be angry.

"Here, Greg, wait a minute." Frank hoisted himself onto the edge of the work-bench, and Greg, glancing swiftly around, saw the gray eyes squinting humorously at him. Frank had a heart sometimes. "Now blat it all out. What's up?"

Gregory blatted it out, a righteous indignation in his voice against the perfidy of creditors who engaged bill collectors. "I've been paying them off when I could, and then to pull this!"

"How much is it?"

"I wouldn't need the whole of it." Greg's fingers wriggled as if they felt money approaching. "Enough to stave 'em off. A couple hundred."

Frank stared about the long room. There were only two other men there, busy at the other end. He looked back at Greg.

"How do you do it? You haven't got a care in the world. You don't pay rent. You don't pay board, often. Oh, I know mother! She keeps Alice from fussing at you. You act as if you thought people ought to be tickled to give you presents. And you come around and ask for a couple hundred—"

"But I told you it's those stupid—"

"Yes, you told me. Darn stupid fools to want any money out of you, I'll say."

"I work, don't I? I can't help it if I ain't rich. I earn all I can."

"Nice ladylike job, selling neckties to other fools. I don't know what to do with you. I haven't got dollars lying around. I haven't said much since you got back from France. I tried to help you out."

"I'll pay it back. I'll give you a note, any interest you say."

"You gave me a note once. The first year after you got back. Forgot that? You wouldn't go back to school. Too smart. You were going to get a bonus and go in business. What did you do with that bonus? Paid it down on a fancy car. I've got your note. And last year you traded that car for one that looked like more money. You haven't finished paying for that yet, have you? Greg, you act like a baby, strutting around as if you owned the earth."

"You'd rather see me disgraced, would you?" Greg was shivering visibly now, his face distorted into a snarl. "I'll do something! I won't stand it. If your own brother won't help you out... I'll run away. Or worse."

"Sponging on your mother, when you know how little she has. Begging of me, when you know what it costs me, with Alice and the baby. Still strutting. You got to face it some day."

"You've had an easy time. You went to work and you got married and you couldn't enlist because of Alice. Nothing stopped you." Greg had a moment of revulsion, a bad taste in his mouth. He hadn't meant to sling that at Frank. After all, Frank had been decent about Greg's being the only one to go off to war.

"If you'd get a man's job and show you meant business, I'd feel different. It's like pouring water in a sieve, helping you. I know"—Frank rubbed at his forehead, sighing—"I know it's different, trying to fit in again."

"I take that back." Greg looked away, blinking. "Forget it, will you?"

"It's true, I stayed here and got ahead." Frank turned his back, his square shoulders heavy, drooping. "Send your bill collector to me. I'll see what I can do."

Greg was silent, expanding with relief as if Frank's words cut the cords which trussed him up. Then a furtive dismay—that coat.

"If you'd let me have the cash he wouldn't need to bother you."

Frank shook his head. "Nothing doing, young fellow. I'll fix the mess myself."

Greg's thoughts whirled up in a spiral of irritated anxiety. He couldn't object too much.

"Thanks, old man." His voice sounded gruff; he ought to show some gratitude. "When pay-day comes—"

"Just one thing, Greg." Frank turned, his smeared face dignified in a firm tenderness. "You've got to see that this is the last time. I can't always bolster you up. You got to grow up some day. Do you know why I happen to have any spare cash? I been saving for a flivver this spring. Alice doesn't get out much."

"I'll see you get it back with interest."

"I don't know where you'll get it."

"And I can put you next to a dandy little bus, on time. Your credit's good," Greg offered his suggestion ingratiatingly.

"Why is it?" Frank snorted. "You're an imbecile pup."

Wait till you get a family and have to carry insurance and—”

“Yeah, wait.” Greg started toward the door, complete insouciance in his step. Frank followed him.

“You know, that girl of yours may get tired of waiting. She looks as if she had sense. I can get you a job here, as I’ve told you. It’s hard work and dirty. You can’t drift off any hour to the pool-room. But you’d have something ahead of you. You’re good on engines. It’s all you do know about, outside of how to spend money you haven’t got.”

Greg lifted his head, a deepening of the scornful lines which cut from nostrils past his mouth, as he listened to the factory. The building itself had a rhythmic vibration, as if the belts and pulleys, the whirring engines, the high shrill note of metal against metal, all gave the brick walls a secret inner life, like quick blood pounding through the mortar.

“Wouldn’t I be the snake’s hips here, though?” he said carelessly. “Have to think it over. Well, got to beat it now. Much obliged, old man.” Then he was off, running down the stairs, with a little afterthought that he deserved some credit; he hadn’t explained that a large part of that bill was for wedding furniture. Too bad about the fliv. He’d see that Frank got one, all right.

He drove slowly down-town and parked in front of the Men’s Own Shop, his face moody. Hang that collector anyway, butting in. Why, those bills were so old they ought to be outlawed. He had more important things to settle right now without that fool. And here Frank had to be used for that ancient history.

Greg stalked through the shop, hanging the raccoon coat carefully in place. Tom was busy with a hick, trying on woolen gloves. He might hit up Tom. The only trouble was, Tom had the bulge on him. He’d hold back his pittance on Saturday. Tom had the imagination of a bullfrog.

The farmer departed with his gloves. Tom puttered about in the front of the store. Trade had the awful after-the-holidays dullness. A woman came in to exchange socks she had bought for a gift. Gregory served her, suavely

effective. When she had gone he glanced at his watch, and having ascertained the hour, still looked at the watch. That might at least line his pocket for the evening. Of course, it had been his father's. Clapping on his cap, he rushed past Tom with a hasty, "Back soon."

He strolled back presently with a stiff bit of cardboard in his watch-pocket and money in another pocket. At last he had met the demands of the day. To-morrow was another day. Two hours more and he could drive to the station and Mina would step from the train.

The train was posted a half-hour late. Gregory lounged on the platform, careless, elegant, his fur coat open, his hands in his pockets. His eyes dropped occasionally to the vista of himself.

Snow in the air misted past the signal lights down the track, scurried in broken ripples under the wind across the platform. He'd have to put on the side curtains. Funny thing, how waiting for a girl made you think about her so hard. If it was thinking...Like drowning and seeing your whole life as you went down. No, like having all the pieces of a picture puzzle and not being able to stick them together until she really came. He couldn't see her face—just bits of it. Eyes far apart, brows feather-brown and fine; short hair, with that adorable little swing like a shining bell over her ears; soft, smooth throat. He couldn't put those bits together. Mina wasn't just those bits; more. Her voice, with that droll huskiness. He could almost hear it.

More than a year, now, he had known her. She'd been in town a month or more before they had met. Awful waste. She'd come into the store for a tie and he'd fallen for her right over the counter. Wanted to know who'd get the tie. Her father, she told him later. Seemed bright for a father. "He likes things bright," she said. "He's just a kid." Then he'd seen her at a dance. It was a long time before she'd even admit she liked him. She wasn't a quick petter like lots of the skirts. Not Mina. Serious, too. Keen about her work. Teaching kids to draw things. Brown jugs with pussy-willows. They'd had one swell drive after those pussy-willows.

He reached for a cigarette, puffed at it once, dropped it. The snow whiffed upward past the light as the arm dropped and the green signal winked out. A whistle through the night, a flash of brilliant light sucking the snow into its dazzling center as the train rounded the curve and groaned to a standstill. Gregory ran along the platform. Where was the chair-car?

"Greg!" He whirled. Mina, on the steps of a coach. The bits in his mind gathered swiftly into the whole that was Mina, her pointed chin trembling against the dark fur of her collar, her eyes shining under her little black hat. He seized her bag, swung her down with one hand under her elbow.

"Did you ride in that?" He pointed derisively at the smoky windows.

"I did." Mina hugged his arm swiftly. "You weren't there to stick me into a chair." She stood away from him, her chin just at his shoulder. "What lugs! Aren't you magnificently elegant!"

"Nifty, what?" Gregory assumed a nonchalant tone. "Here, the bus is out back." He steered Mina through the scattered travelers. "Got any more luggage?"

He thrust her bag into the rear of the car, and with a hasty glance about the shadowed drive, bent over her. Her lips were warm on his cold, eager mouth.

"You darling!" He rushed off with her trunk check, shouted her address to the baggage clerk and hurtled back, climbing in behind the wheel. "Starved?" He sighed contentedly. Just as he had imagined it, his coat bulking furiously between them, Mina's face vague beside him. "Food first." He jammed the starter. "How'd I know you were coming back?" He wound past the waiting taxis out to the street. "No letters or nothing."

"Something happened. I couldn't write about it. So I waited."

"I'd of appreciated a word or so. Tell you one thing, when you have the hard deal I've been having you want to hear from your girl."

"Who's been picking on you?"

"You needn't grin. The whole rattling world!"

Mina was silent. Greg peered at her as he ran in toward the curb and something in her sober, lifted profile startled him.

"What happened?" He stopped the car and leaned toward her.

"You can't kiss me here, Greg!" She pried at the door.

"Here." He reached over her to unfasten the catch. "Somebody been saying things about me?"

"I'll tell you." She slipped out to the sidewalk. "Dinner first."

The Chinese waiter bowed them obsequiously into their favorite booth at the end of the long upstairs restaurant. Greg snapped off the sidelight, flung himself out of his coat, piling it on the bench at his side.

"Steak'll be good for you. You look tired." He gave the order with brisk carelessness. Then they were alone, looking at each other across the checkered mosaic of the table. Mina pulled off her gloves and rested her hands, fingers interlaced, at the edge of the table; white, small, competent fingers. No rings. She wouldn't let Greg give her a ring.

And Gregory, lifting his eyes from her hands to her face, felt a premonition, a kind of chilly shiver along his nerve-ends. Why, they hadn't seen each other for two weeks! Mina ought to be full of that soft, gay delight which usually shone in her eyes and touched her firm small mouth into shadowy curves. Instead of that she was heavy-lidded and her mouth looked almost derisive. Was Mina going to fail him? Just when he'd worked so hard to straighten up everything the fiendish day had poured on his head?

"Missed me?" he said defiantly. Mina nodded. "You don't look as if you liked my looks."

"You're handsome as ever, Greg." Mina's fingers parted, interlaced again.

"You aren't mad about anything?"

She shook her head. "No, Greg. Wait—till you have your steak."

"Why wait?" He lolled back in his corner, touched with sulkiness. If she was going to spoil things—

The waiter shuffled into the booth and silence dropped as he served them. Mina mixed the dressing slowly, with graceful motions of her hands. Gregory was solicitous about the steak. Was it too rare? This piece, then? Finally they were again alone.

"My Lord, Mina, I can't eat opposite a sphinx!" Greg reached abruptly over the table and caught her hand. It trembled, cold to his touch. "Mina!"

"Don't call me names." Mina smiled at him. "Greg, I saw the funniest family on the train." She pulled her hand away and fumbled in her bag. "There, I drew 'em for you." She spread a sheet of note-paper on the table. "All of them."

Gregory laughed. Mina had a devilish way of catching folks with her pencil. She was eating now, telling him about the family, amusing him so that he almost forgot that shiver of his nerves until finally, over the coffee, she looked up at him without a trace of smile.

"I'll tell you now," she said. "Greg, that publishing house in Chicago, you know, the one that's been buying some of my sketches? They've written me to come. They want an illustrator. Twice what I'm getting now."

Gregory gulped on coffee so hot that he choked.

"For children's books. And I-am going."

"To Chicago?" Greg set down his cup.

"As soon as I find a substitute for my job."

"You're going away?" Greg stared at her, his eyes unbelieving, his mouth drooping into the tremulous line of injured youth. "You mean you don't care enough about me—about us—"

"I am running away, Greg." Mina leaned back against the partition, her shoulders straight. "Before I care too much."

"Why, if you go off there I couldn't see you—once a year! Why, Mina, you're crazy! What you talking about? You make money enough. And anyway, soon's I get to earning more—"

"Yes." Mina flung off her hat suddenly, running her fingers through her fine, disordered hair. She leaned forward again, her elbows on the table, her hands firm under her chin. "Greg, I've got to go. I've pretended I could play with

you, awhile, without minding. You're a perfect little playboy." A dull flush crept up to Greg's cheek-bones. "But you don't ever grow up. I don't dare stay."

"You want me to settle down, as the family says—is that it?"

"No. I can't imagine you any different, Greg. A gilded little playboy. But I have to run away. I never tried to make you over, have I? You said that was one thing about me—" Mina dropped her hands into her lap. "I'm not trying now. But I'm afraid of you. When I went home this time I stopped to think. It's been nice, our playing."

"It isn't play!" Greg's fist on the table clattered the coffee-cup in its saucer. "You care more about your career, is that it? One of these modern girls?"

"I'll tell you about going home, Greg. You saw my people this summer. You didn't think much of my father, did you? He used to be handsome. He gave mother a radio set for Christmas and he didn't pay for that. There wasn't even coal in the cellar. I gave mother money for coal, Greg. They aren't poor, exactly. But father never catches up to year before last. You see, he's a playboy, too. Mother has tried to make him over until he can't endure a word she says." Her voice dropped. "I don't want to be ashamed of you. I want to go away, now. Before I find I can't get on without you. I won't love you!"

"Ashamed of me!" A mixture of rage and fear confused Greg's tongue. "Most g-girls don't feel that way, I'll tell the universe."

"You don't see, do you? Poor Greg." Mina's white sharpness was suffused briefly with tenderness. "There's nothing real about you, is there? All show. The dearest, most amusing show. My father was like that. Only he grew up and never grew up, and an old playboy isn't nice. Sort of faded and tattered. And awfully cross. Then while I was looking at him and giving him money I had this letter from Chicago. So I'm just stepping out."

"But Mina! I always thought, even if we never talked about it, that you didn't want to get married yet. That some

day we would. Why, I'm plain nuts about you. I don't know why you're lighting into me because of your father."

"Get married!" Mina settled into white reserve. "I wouldn't marry a man I didn't respect. I don't have to get married. I've been foolish, seeing you. If I can't help loving you, some, I can go away."

Gregory felt an uprush of rebellious defense, fiery, self-reinstating. But suddenly it leaked away, leaving him empty, amazed.

"Why"—his words rattled as if his head were empty—"why don't you respect me?"

"If I tell you, you'll just be angry. Probably never speak to me again. You've got a convenient temper, Greg."

"You tell me."

Mina caught her lip between shining, small teeth. Then, with a desperate, quick gesture of her hand, she cried out:

"Because you are a cheat. A dodger. And selfish. And so lovable you break my heart. You pretend you're something. And you're nothing. Nothing real. Just a child." She rose, dragging on her coat. Gregory followed her, stopping at the desk to fling down a bill, lighting a cigarette after three matches broke under his fingers. He darted down the stairway and found Mina prying at the luggage compartment after her bag.

"I'll drive you home," he grunted.

Greg stared out at the snow blowing crazily across the funnel of light from the car; he watched the red surface creep out as the snow on the hood melted. He knew that Mina shrank into her corner of the seat.

He swung up in front of Mina's boarding-house, jumped out and dragged her bag from the locker. Then he followed her to the steps, the snow squeaking under their feet. At the door Mina faced him.

Greg dropped the bag and, his arm steel about her shoulders, he kissed her. Her tears stung his lips, but when he released her she said, "Good-by, Greg," and slipped through the door.

He drove down a dark street towards home, trying frenziedly to whip up his rage. Ashamed of him, was she?

Didn't respect him! But some wire was cut; he could get no fire. He locked the garage and tiptoed through the back entry to his room. He could hear Frank and Alice in the sitting room. He hoped his mother was asleep. He locked his door and sat on the edge of the bed. Presently he became aware of the dark, striped fur under his hands. Why, he'd worn it into the house! He wiggled out of it and dove for the closet. Then he stopped, the coat draped from listless hands. A cheat. Well, he was. He flung it on the bed and slowly drew out of several pockets an array of crumpled envelopes. A playboy. Pretending.

He scrawled through the litter on his table for a sheet of paper. Queer, how cold he felt. Inside. Cold and empty. Tattered, Mina said. Faded. He felt naked, not tattered. On an icy hilltop. That wind, splattering snow against the window, blew inside him. Funny, how he couldn't get Mina's hands out of his eyes. White, firm fingers, so cold when he last touched them . . .

He sat down at the table and began methodically to open envelopes and to set down figures in a sprawling column. When he had opened the last envelope he turned the sheet. Pencil dug into the paper, he frowned. Then he set down more figures. Out of his head. Debts of honor—Lanky had had all the luck last night. He stopped once, wishing that Mina could see what he was doing. No. Ashamed of him. She hadn't known about all these things. Finally he began slowly to add his crooked columns. At last his head dropped forward on folded arms over the paper.

"Greg, are you home?"

"Yes."

"So early. Didn't Mina come?"

"Yes, mother." He pushed his voice out in an imitation of cheerfulness. "I'm off to bed nice and early."

"Don't you want some hot cocoa?" She tried the knob.

"No." Reluctantly he unlocked the door. "Just bed."

She looked up at him, her nostrils quivering slightly as if she scented disaster.

"You feeling well?" He bent docilely for her kiss. "You

didn't quarrel?" At his hasty denial she sighed. "Well, sleep tight."

Through the half open window all night the snow-air touched Greg's face and he dreamed of driving madly through a storm, hunting for Mina. He had to find her, to tell her something... and then his car lurched past control down long ice-covered slopes until he woke with his heart jumping against his breast, and he ground his face down against his arm and lay, sleepless.

The next morning he maneuvered the fur coat down the front stairs and out to the garage without interruption. Since he was taking it back to Dickey, there was no use inviting trouble.

He hurried through breakfast. Then he drove down through the town. He came out from Dickey's store minus his coat, gazing ruefully at the five-dollar bill he carried. Well, he'd had to split with Dickey to ease him off. He passed the Men's Own Shop, stopped with a flourish in front of the red-faced garage and strolled into the office. Presently a mechanic came out, climbed in and disappeared around the corner. Greg lounged against the gas tank, elaborately casual, until the car poked its long nose into sight again.

"Yeah, she's like silk. You know how to humor a car." The mechanic peered under the hood. "I'll tell the boss."

Some minutes later Greg emerged from the office.

"We might do better if you want to wait for a sale," the man called after him.

Greg, staring at the check between his fingers, shook his head.

"Guess the ole bus doesn't owe me much," he said. "Can't wait." He paused an instant beside the car and then with a jerk of his shoulders, strode off.

A short interview with Tom. When the four-fifty for tires was deducted, there wasn't so much coming on part of a week. "Sorry, old boy," said Tom. "I'll miss you. But trade is pretty dull."

Hard-pan. That was it. Greg buttoned his old overcoat—

it wasn't so shabby, at that—and rushed for a passing street-car.

When he came into the test room Frank looked up at him, a flicker of dismay on his face. Greg saw it.

"I don't want any money," he blurted out. "You said there was a job here."

"Good Lord!" Frank whistled. "What's hit you?"

"None of your business." Greg stuttered a little. "Or were you running a bluff?"

Greg didn't go home at noon. Had to see some fellows about a few little matters. Queer, how no one seemed to notice he wasn't driving the ole bus. No one seemed grateful about getting his money.

Hard old world.

He went back to the assembling room. Frank had told the foreman he was a crack driver. Maybe they'd give him a chance at the trial spins. The fellow hinted he might. That'd be better than watching a Hunkie till he caught on.

Lord, he was tired! Four o'clock. The fellows would be hanging around the green table, the smoke in gray-white wreaths about their heads. Huh! Wouldn't know whether he came or not.

Five. Half past five. He was one of the gang dribbling out of the employees' entrance. He dodged down the dark street; didn't want Frank to catch up with him. His hands ached. So did his head.

Feet slithering in the trampled snow, he strode along. Hard-pan. His face twisted grotesquely and he pulled his cap farther over his eyes.

"Greg!" Mina darted at him, seized his arm. He stopped abruptly. "Where have you been?" she gasped breathless.

"Playing." He started along, aware of dark figures tramping behind them.

"I went into the store to-day. Tom said you weren't there. Then I went to your house, Greg."

"Wha' for?" He wouldn't tell her a thing. She'd think she'd done it.

"I don't know. I had to see you." Her face shone palely. "Something drove me."

"What you want to see anybody you despise so for?"

"Maybe I despise myself." Mina shook her head, a fierce little gesture. "I'm going. I haven't changed my mind. But I had to see you."

"What for?"

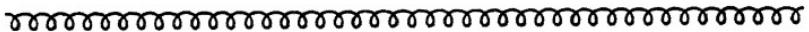
"Because—after all—you can't be different. And I love you. I had to say so. That's all."

She sprang away from him and Greg caught her as she slipped in the snowy gutter. "You wait a minute." He shook her arm. "You can go ahead. Take your ole job. But I'm coming after you. Playboy! I'll show you. You think you're more of a man than I am. You wait!" Greg's explosive phrases ceased and he hesitated, suddenly abashed. "Mina, I'm not so bad. Honest."

He pulled Mina back to the sidewalk and they walked along together, buffeted by the men hurrying homeward.

"Where have you been?" Mina asked.

"I won't tell you. Not yet." He laughed suddenly. "It's something fierce, having a girl that's so smart. Keeps a fellow humping hisself!"



YOUNGER SISTER

ETHEL looked into the closet, the top bureau drawer. Nothing more to go into her traveling bag. She'd certainly come home with a light load this trip. She'd been too sick to know what she was packing the night she decided to come. The green silk night-dress! Lucky her mother hadn't spied that garment; it didn't belong in an upper chamber of a farmhouse. The long sleeved cotton flannel wrapper dangling from a hook was her mother's. It had folded about her shivering body those first days, a penitential robe in which she was shriven. Ethel leaned toward the wavy mirror, wedging it back with a hair-brush, twisting to inspect the seams of her gauze stockings. Straight enough. That dress looked pretty good, for a basement bargain. She flicked nervous fingers at the scarlet flower on one shoulder. Home was all right when you were sick, but it was time now to get out. Her mother had begun to look at her with that secret, inquiring stare. She experimented briefly with rouge and lipstick, and then dropped them into her purse. Better wait till she was on the train. She sure needed a new wave. With both thin hands she brushed her hair back from her forehead. No. Clara could have her heavy curls shingled until they made a sleek cap, with dark points in front of her ears, parentheses for her luminous eyes. Clara was seventeen. Twenty-seven was something else again! Ethel shook her hair softly into place; the lines past the corners of her mouth didn't show so

much... but she never, at seventeen or any other age, had had the looks Clara had suddenly grown into. Wouldn't know they were sisters.

"Ethel, you all packed?" Her mother's slow, flat tread sounded in the hall. "You want this preserve?" She came into the room, a newspaper-wrapped jar in her hand. "It's that rhubarb and pineapple."

"Yes, I got room for it." Jerry would like it for breakfast. Ethel clicked the bag shut, with a bleak after thought. Would there be any more breakfasts with Jerry?

"I wanted to talk to you. Supper's all ready." Mrs. Black sat on the bed, her rough fingers moving along the iron rail, where white paint had flecked off. Her crisp percale apron rustled over her knees. Ethel shrugged. Advice, of course. Her mother sat as if she were a mountain, uncommunicative dark eyes, firm mouth, graying hair brushed smoothly back. One deep wrinkle cut between her brows, but her hands were quiet in her lap. "It's about Clara. She won't listen to me, any more than you ever would. You can see how she's changed, suddenly. She thinks she's grown up. I don't know what she's doing, any more than I know about you." The slightest emphasis on *know*. "I told you about that man. And you're wearing yourself out."

"I work hard, don't I?" Ethel quivered into defense. "I keep a job, and never ask favors. I been working since I wasn't so old as Clara."

"Yes, you work. I'm not talking about you. It's Clara. She's too pretty. The boys don't let her be. She likes it. I thought she might listen to you. She thinks you're different, being away from home, good clothes and all. Her father's half crazy, the way she's running. If you could talk to her... make her think what she wants to do. She's worth more than marrying one of these fellows she's got... not at her age. I don't know as they think of marrying, anyway. I don't know what they do think of, these days. She's going to the train with you." She stood up, the knuckles on her hand prominent as her fingers closed over the rail. "She's got brains. If you were different, she might go to town to live with you while she studied to be something."

Under her mother's slow inspection Ethel felt nerve fibers strain, fray.... What did her mother mean, anyway? Funny, the way her mother could throw a scare into her. "As if I was a kid and she had a right to blow me up." Ethel laid the back of her hand against a flat hip in a gesture subtly insolent, calculated to restore her poise. "Sure. I'll give her advice. But as for having her live with me—that kid!"

"You can't take decent care of yourself, let alone anybody else." Mrs. Black stood near her daughter, her lips compressed. "Look at you, nervous as a kite. You're better at that than when you came last week. At least you know what's right, whatever you do. Clara don't listen to me, any more than you ever did. That's why I wished you'd speak to her."

From the rear of the house came sounds: a door slamming, and a man's shout, "Martie! Where you gone?"

"Well, there's your Pa." Mrs. Black started toward the door, turning her head for a final, shrewd, despairing glance at Ethel. "Supper's ready when you are."

Something about the last glimpse of her, patient shoulders, rounded slightly, firmly corseted waist and broad hips, held Ethel a moment, twisting fingers about the mottled snake-skin purse. It was only when she came back to the farm that she felt this way, tense, remorseful, almost frightened. Just because her mother was old-fashioned, as out of date as her corsets, as solid in her ideas as her wide hips. God, a girl couldn't stay an innocent baby all her life, just because her mother,— In a scramble she gathered up traveling bag, scarlet hat, near-seal coat. Her mother had mended the rip on the shoulder. "I should think a good cloth coat would stand you better than a cheap fur like this." Ethel heard her voice flavoring with steady disapproval every humble service she offered this daughter.

"If I was married to a poor man and had four kids and another on the way, like Charley and Anna, she'd think I was fine." Ethel clattered down the bare stairs, her heel catching in a splintered step. She left bag and coat in the cold hall, and with brazen tappings of her pumps, went on

to the kitchen. All she had to do was to hold her tongue for another hour and she'd be gone.

Her father turned from the sink, staring as he rubbed his hands dry on the roller towel. "All ragged out, eh?" he said. "Going back to your high life?"

"I don't draw my pay for staying here."

"I don't know what you do draw it for, silks and furs and—"

"Now, Pa!" Mrs. Black elbowed him out of her way. "You and Ethel leave each other alone. Sit down and start your supper." With unhurried competence she set the food on the table. Ethel poured tea from the granite tea-pot, drank hastily, and as she replaced the heavy cup, rubbed a thumb against the crimson smear her lip left at the rim. Across the table her father's lean, weathered face had settled in deep wrinkles of resentment. He always jumped on her for something. Vaguely Ethel felt that his resentment was toward himself, as struggling, unsuccessful farmer; she was indifferent to his innuendoes about her short skirts, her rouge, her city life. He had hated her escaping, her having money of her own. Well, he'd never done much for any of his family.

"Where's Clara?" His tone accused his wife.

"She'll be right along." Mrs. Black came to the table with a plate of hot biscuits, returned to the sink and the milk pans. "I was reading in the paper about a new separator—" her slow voice built a little wall of dull facts between Ethel and her father, between Clara and her father.

Ethel drank more hot tea. She wasn't hungry. Years of suppers like this. Charley had run away first. If he'd stayed and helped work the farm. . . . Only thing he seemed able to do was have children. Then Ethel had gone. Now Clara.

"Where is that girl?" Her father thrust aside his quickly emptied plate. "I told her she wasn't to hang around town after school."

"She had to wait for Artie. He said he'd drive Ethel to the train."

"Artie! If it ain't one fellow, it's another. I could drive Ethel."

"Thanks for the buggy ride, but I'd rather have Artie's limousine."

"There she is!" Mrs. Black shook her head slightly at Ethel. Leave him be, her eyes insisted. Outside in the yard a car rattled and stopped. The door flew open.

"Hello." Clara dropped into the vacant chair, shoving back her small hat. Her smooth, ingenuous forehead was a child's, thought Ethel, but the wary glance under heavy lashes at her father, at her mother, was that of a wise little animal scenting the land. "Have to hustle. Artie has to use his bus." She speared a biscuit with a fork. "I borrowed it and said I'd be right back."

"Didn't he come? You can't drive that thing at night."

"Now, Pa! I'm a regular wow of a driver." Clara giggled, a soft little note that curved her small mouth. She was pretty. Ethel stared at her: points of dark hair like feathers against the faint perfect color of her cheeks; round, firm chin; slim neck with subtle hollow at the base, just finger-tip in size. Was she jealous of Clara . . . for being young?

"You eat your supper," said Mrs. Black. "Artie can wait."

"Oh, Ma! I had a hot chocolate."

"I don't doubt it. How you keep your complexion. . . . I'll get your things, Ethel. Your coat'll be damp, there in the hall."

Ethel pulled her bright hat down, shook herself into the fur coat. There! She saw Clara's swift glance. She guessed she didn't look so slow, not in that coat. Jerry had helped pick that. (*Oh, Jerry!*)

"I'd like a fur coat." Clara jumped to her feet. "Now, Ma, don't tell me mine's better than you had when you were a girl." She wrapped her shoddy gray coat across her slim body with a quick burlesque of style, and her hips swaying in a dance step, crossed to the sink. "The tub boiled on the way out. Have to give it a drink. Step to it, Ethel. Bid the old farm farewell." She disappeared with the pail of water.

"You can see the ideas you put in her head, with your fine clothes and all." Ethel pecked at her father's cheek in cursory good-by, as he strode past her to the door, to shout out at Clara, "I want you back here in an hour, you hear?"

You'll have a good chance to say something." Mrs. Black spoke in hasty undertone, bending to pick up Ethel's bag. "Now take care of yourself." Mr. Black had vanished. "Ethel, you still running with that same fellow? It's no use my talking, but he's not the kind to settle down and make a home for any woman. If you—"

"Oh, Ma! For crying out loud! I haven't seen him for months. Now anything else you don't like before I go?" Ethel edged away from the hand that smoothed the fur of her cuff, fingers red against the dull black.

"There's plenty I don't mention." Her mother kissed her. "Clara's honking for you. Good-by."

The lights of the car, dim as the girls jolted out of the yard, showed sagging palings of the white fence, glimmered across black branches of lilacs at the gate, caught in tangled weeds along the ditch; then bright with increased speed, they focussed on the deserted country road, frozen and black. "Kindly omit flowers, eh?" Clara drove with disregard of ruts. "Gee, you must be glad to get back to the city." She sighed. Even in the dark her face had a hint of soft and lovely contour. Ethel sniffed.

"Where'd you get that perfume?"

"'S'at still smell?" Clara laughed. "Biddle gave it to me this noon in the drugstore. Its name means Allure, in French."

"What you doing in the drugstore at noon?"

"Why, us girls always go over there after we eat lunch. If anybody's rich we have a soda, or sometimes a fellow stands for it."

"I shouldn't think you'd do much at school, running around the way you are." Ethel ventured warily into advice; another few minutes and they'd be in town. She'd promised her mother....

"Great Hat, Eth!" The girl slackened the speed of the car, and peered at her sister. "I bet Ma asked you to give me a word. Honest, they make me sick! You can take it from me, little Clara knows her onions." She jerked at the gas lever, and the car bounced ahead. "You can talk. You get away where you can do what you please. What they don't

know don't hurt 'em about you, I bet. It sure puts a brake on your speed to have folks prying into your private affairs all the time. I want to get away, like you. I want to be like you, Eth."

A long tremor ran over Ethel. Like her! She wasn't ashamed of herself; she had a right to do what she pleased. But Clara... why, she was nothing but a little girl.

"Now, see here." Her stiff lips hardened her words into little pebbles. "They're sending you through school, and that's more than they could do for me. I had to start work when I was fifteen."

"Oh, school!"

"Well, you got a chance to be something. I had to go to night school to learn typing and stenog, after working all day, too. (*Bitter cold that winter, hurrying home from the dingy second story rooms of the business school to the dingy third story room she shared with May, the girl who had got her a job as cash girl in the Emporium. Bob... she had noticed him among the fellows at the pool room doorway, had skidded into his arms on a windswept, icy corner. 'What's your hurry, dearie?'... and after that evening he waited for her... until he crept up the creaking stairway to her room the night May went home to see her folks. Oh, God, she was only sixteen then. If you began loving at sixteen.... She wasn't ashamed for herself, but Clara ought to be different.*) See, you got a chance," she said. "The folks will help you, and I will, too. You just make up your mind what you want to do. If you run around with these country boys... well, you know what happens! Ma was telling me about Jennie Fox, and how her father had to go after the fellow with a gun."

"Jennie never did have much sense. A girl can keep out of trouble."

Ethel shivered again; the matter-of-fact young voice filled her with unreasonable terror. Houses with lighted windows appeared along the road; a few more minutes and the drive would end at the station. Why should she mind what Clara did? Why wasn't it good enough for her? Clara was driving slowly, past the block of stores, her head alert, watching for

some one. Suppose Clara knew everything about her, everything. Ethel hugged her elbows against the convulsive tremor of her body. I'm not her mother, she cried out to herself, as if she must crush out this new thing that quickened within her.

"There's one thing sure," she said, fiercely. "You got to be able to earn your own living. You may be smarter than Jennie, someways, but a girl's got to earn her keep. I do that, anyway. Unless you get married. You'd have a sweet life with any fellow you could pick up around here. Look at Charley and his wife, and Charley's better than some."

"Not for li'l Clara! But look at this dump to live in. Honest, Eth, it's too dead to smell. Even run the movies just twice a week." As they rounded the drugstore corner, she waved a gay hand. Another instant, and she spun the car dexterously into place behind the small wooden station; a yard man with smoky lantern passed, his grotesque shadow jerking along sheds, road, embankment.

"Clara!" Ethel seized the girl's wrist as she pulled at the stubborn door. "Wait a sec. Ma's worried to death. She says there's a man . . ."

"I told you they pried into everything!" Clara wrenched her hand free, and banged upon the door. "He's not here now."

"He's here sometimes, isn't he, if he's a traveling man?"

"No. His route's changed."

"He's married, isn't he?"

"Oh, cats, I don't know. What of it? Can't a man speak to a girl if he is married? You sound as mossy as Ma herself, and you can't make me swallow that from you."

"Now, you listen!" Ethel held the rough sleeve of Clara's coat, irritation tightening her throat. She was wrenched in two; half was Clara, hotly defending herself; half was someone older, fearful, responsible. "You been driving with him pretty often. When a traveling salesman who's got a wife takes a school girl out for a ride, he wants just one thing, and that isn't extra weight to make his buggy ride smooth."

Clara's arm stiffened. Then, hastily, "Oh, gees! There comes ole Artie. If I could get away from here, Eth. Honest,

I haven't done a thing. You know. Just a little loving, like everybody does. Eth, if I could come and stay with you. Why, hello, Artie. Meet my sister, Artie."

How young he was, with prominent ears and mouth still uncertain, bumptious in his eagerness to meet Clara's chaff, to show off to Clara's sister. He strutted manfully in his green plaid reefer, swinging Ethel's bag. (He's crazy about Clara, and she can bully him...) Ethel walked beside them to the platform, shivering in the chill January night. She pushed her fur collar higher about her throat. (Funny to meet a boy and not to start her own line with him; she could make him sit up and take notice. Straight and black a thought laid a bar against those brushings of vanity. If Clara were with her, what would happen to her own line with men?) The train rushing past them, light on smoke billows, grinding of brakes, seemed for a moment to be her thought grown huge and solid and final. Then she was in her seat, Artie had placed her bag beside her, she was waving through the window to the two on the platform as the train jerked and clattered away.

"My Lord, I feel funny." She huddled in the corner by the window, her fingers moving over the pebbled surface of her purse. "I don't know what ails me." Her eyelids dropped; her face, under the close red hat, looked pinched and frightened. "You couldn't expect me to take that baby to live with me."

"Tickets!" She found the white pasteboard in her purse, smiled at the conductor's "Back to town, eh?" When he had gone, she fingered the small mirror in her purse. Heavens! She looked ghastly! The motion of the train made a slow process of the touching up. She pulled a curl forward, settled her hat, drew in the curve of her upper lip. The man across the aisle was watching. With a sigh she shut away her vanity case and settled back. He was too fat to bother with. Head against the green plush of the seat, she watched her dim reflection on the window, a little ghost face hurried past dark country, lost momentarily when station lights blinked in at her. Always this train ride back to town had meant mile by swift mile the shaking free from constraint, from

the tension under her mother's slow inspection, as if home held her by a thread which when stretched to miles enough, snapped to free her. She waited, unconsciously, for that moment. Perhaps Jerry would meet her, after all. They had quarreled before. Perhaps... "*I'd like to be like you, Eth...*" Oh, God! She beat one fist against her knee. How could she help what her sister did? Then she was quiet, biting at her crimson lip. Something rode with her this night, something no stretch of miles could break for her; something bitter and terrifying and bewildering.

The voice of the train changed, from full roar that spread over the dark level fields of the country to a note shriller, more compressed, echoed back from factory walls and warehouses. The next station. Ethel got to her feet as the train slowed for a siding, and started down the aisle, bumping her bag on the seats. Some one said, too close to her ear, "Lemme carry that for you, girlie." The fat man. Ethel relinquished the bag, but her demure smile was automatic. She scarcely noticed that his shoulder pressed hers in the swaying vestibule. She wasn't really there; she had run ahead, with straining intensity, to the moment after the train had stopped, after she had stepped down to the platform. Would Jerry meet her? And if he did.... The fat man was saying something.

"What's your number, girlie? How about you and me taking the same cab?"

"Oh, no, thanks." Ethel gave him her best *I'd love to but you know how it is* look. "I'm expecting a friend to meet me." For a moment her vanity flowered under his warm ogling; then it withered. Suppose Clara were there!

"Maybe he won't show up. S'pose I wait and see, eh?" An insinuating whisper close to her cheek.

"I sh'd say not." Ethel seized her bag, and as the conductor shoved the step in place, she jumped down, her glance scurrying along the platform. Her straining eagerness sagged, like a dying top. No Jerry. Was that fat fool puffing at her elbow? She'd wait in the women's room till he had gone. Then, as she neared the doorway, her eagerness

whipped from its flopping spiral into giddy spinning. Jerry strolled toward her from the shadow of the portico.

"'Lo, kid." He took her bag; his other hand pressed into the fur of her sleeve, as he led her around the building, away from the lights.

"Well, I thought you weren't here." (Oh, that tall, careless swagger!)

"I wanted to be damn sure you hadn't some other boy friend. How'd I even know you were coming, when you wouldn't bother to write to me?"

"I wasn't writing to any fellow that was as mean as you. And if you're going to be nasty now, you can run right home." They stood still, Ethel close to his breast, her elbow nestling into the crook of his arm, her face upturned. "Are you, honey?"

"You call it nasty to mind your loving up another man? My God, what you think I am?"

"Honey, it was nothing at all but that gin. You know that gin was rotten. Look how sick it made me! I didn't know what I was doing."

"I'll say you didn't." Jerry lowered. Then his arm hardened about her waist. "Come on. My car's back here. I gotta kiss you. Hell, but I missed you."

In his coupe, shut into semi-darkness, Jerry kissed her. Then he drove expertly away from the station. Ethel felt his consciousness of her in slight pressure of thigh and shoulder as she drooped against him. She was tired. The excitement of meeting, the sweet triumph of his having to be there, had been swallowed in a recurring wave of confusion. She had hoped, without knowing her hope, that Jerry could make her forget about Clara. And he couldn't. He stopped for a traffic light at a corner.

"I got some grand Scotch." He patted his overcoat pocket. "Real stuff straight from Canada. A nip of that'll set you up. You don't look so life-ey. Visiting the old folks sure wears you out. If drinking makes you loving, you can drink all you want to with me. Only don't let me find you pulling a party with another guy again. I might kill him." He swung on with the green light, turning down a side street. Ethel

sat away from him, her palms pressed tight together. Another block of frame houses set back in yards...fringed bridge lamps showing rosy and gold between curtains at the windows...and then a row of brick apartment houses. Jerry ran near the curb and stopped. "Come on, baby. I sure am hungry for good liquor and you."

"Jerry." Ethel's voice rasped in a dry throat. "I got to talk to you. You can't come in. I got to cut it out."

"Huh?"

"Yes. I guess I got to cut it out. You know my sister, Jerry. You saw her last summer. Clara. Well, she wants to come to town. She's awful pretty. She wants to come and stay with me and learn to do something. The folks can't do anything with her. She's running around with a married man, and she's not seventeen yet. Jerry, I got to let her come."

"She isn't here tonight, is she? What's the big idea, shaking me? What's she got to do with you and I?"

"She says..." Ethel shivered, "she wants to be like me."

"That goes all right with me."

"Jerry! Oh, God! I got to cut it out. Loving and everything. She's nothing but a kid. I don't know what's got into me, but I got to cut it out. It's all right for me. I'm not ashamed. But it don't seem right for her. Jerry, don't you see?"

"She's not your kid, is she? She's got a mother. What's the idea of your spoiling all your fun for a kid? She looked like hot stuff already to me. Got off some wise cracks, too. You're crazy, baby. You need a good drink, that's all. This home stuff's got you going wrong."

"It's just for a little while, till she gets a start. She says she wants to be like me, and when she said that, it just made me sick. Honest, Jerry, an' I don't know why. Only I feel I got to give her a chance."

"What about me? Here I waited two weeks for you, and never had a word from you, and never even squinted at another frail. Here I am crazy about you, and you say I can't come in! Jeese, you're plain loco!" He flung an arm around her shoulders, and kissed her, hard, demanding

kisses. "Put your arms up round my neck, honey-girl. You'll see then!"

For a moment the new, unaccountable impulse in Ethel almost perished, smothered under Jerry's touch, his whispers; then it struggled shrilly into activity again, an angry wasp at her ear.

"No, I can't. If I let you in, I'll never do any different." Ethel was out of the car, tugging at her bag, running up the stone steps. She was sobbing, and could not find her key. There, under the lip stick. The door shut her into a deserted lobby, and through the glass, tear-refracted, she saw Jerry drive away.

She climbed a flight of stairs and unlocked her door upon a darkness of hot, dead air, through which her hand wavered to find a light. Her fingers caught a silk fringe, and then the light glowed under rose silk canopy. This was hers, this place: one small room with a window on an alley, a bath, a gas plate in a closet. A dust-film dulled the surfaces of things; the phonograph cover stood open; through the closet door trailed a fold of peach negligee; cigarette stubs, tall glasses, bits of a broken record, dried sandwiches littered the table. She had left a mess! She set down her bag with a furtive slowness, as if she tried to hide from herself, went to the bathroom door. Soiled towels, dust-grayed enamel, and on the floor a flat bottle of gin with its faked label. Ethel picked it up. Half full. A shot would certainly set her up. Still...she ought to pour it right down the sink, if she meant what she said. After all, it cost money; she wouldn't throw it away. Reluctantly she opened the closet door, strained on tiptoe to poke the bottle behind a hat-box on the shelf. There! That showed she meant something. With a long sigh she hurried across to the phonograph. From the disarray of silk pillows on the couch, Mimi, her French doll, leered at her through grotesque loops of arms and legs. Why, it was just since summer she had lived here, just since she got her raise and could move out of a furnished room. When she got the couch and rug paid for, she meant to have a stuffed chair. For Jerry! She wound viciously at the handle of the phonograph and set the needle

on the dusty record. It had been a small, safe, secret place, where she would do just what she wished. If Clara had to come... well, it was too small to hide anything; not a chance to get by. Zipp! Whoom! The fox-trot crashed into the silent room. She tried to swing into a jazzy step as she slipped off her coat, but a whimper twisted her lips, and suddenly she had flung herself down on the couch, beating a fist at limp Mimi, crying.

Then a series of queer, flat days began. Work from nine to five, routine of dictation, typing, filing. Window shopping with other office girls; by Wednesday they knew every window display on their beat, with no chance of a new one until Monday. Dinners... an egg or a pork chop in her closet kitchenette. Movies at seven thirty, with no hand closing over hers, no square fingers spanning her wrist, moving slyly to elbow hollow. *God, what did people do with themselves!* Why should she give up everything? Who'd ever done as much for her? Clara wasn't worth it. Jerry needed her, didn't he, when all he had was a wife who'd got a separation and most of his wages? Not that he cared; he was off marriage for life, he said. Then a letter from her mother. Clara was running around a lot. She wanted to quit school at the end of the term and take a business course. "Do you want her to stay with you?" There followed words marked over so heavily that Ethel couldn't guess at them. "It may sound hard to say to my own daughter, but you had a good bringing up and if you will swear to me you'll look out for her decent the few months she'd be with you her father can find the money to send her I guess. The only thing for a girl like her is to get a decent husband early which if you had done would of been better."

The end of the term; that meant early February. Just a little while away. "If you will swear to me..." Ethel wrote: "I've got a double cot bed and it wouldn't hurt Clara any to live with me three months while she takes the course here."

A few weeks off. If she could only see Jerry; if he would drop in to have supper with her, maybe. One noon she

telephoned to the factory where he was foreman, asked for him; at the sound of his voice she rocked in the booth, listening minutes after his last impatient, "Hello! Hello! Who the hell's calling?" No, she couldn't ask him to drop in. If the sound of his voice did that to her... she leaned against the door, limp, cold, her heart racing.

No use starting another fellow to fill up empty hours. She felt too lifeless, anyway, without a drink to jazz things up. And if she did drink, then she felt lonesome, and had to be loved. But if any one had told her Jerry would drop away with no more protest than he had made.... Maybe he'd had another girl already. If she got to thinking that way, she'd just go crazy.

The first Sunday Ethel edged through the day like a wired puppet, washing and ironing her flimsy silk undergarments, cleaning her small flat, curling her hair. Once, toward evening, as she hung away a dress she had pressed, she stood on tiptoe, reaching back on the closet shelf. Her fingers touched the cool smooth glass of the bottle, lingered, and then broke away.

The next week had for variety only weather—sleet, wind, and flurries of snow, in which Ethel shivered, and thought drearily that such days Jerry would have met her with his car. There was a new picture at one theater, of a mother's sacrifice for her daughter; Ethel sniffed luxuriously at the final closeup of tragic face peering in from the wild storm at the beautiful bride in her husband's embrace, also in his family mansion. If she could feel noble like that—But as she made her way out of the theater in the semi-obscurity of the news reel, she thought she saw Jerry. Surely that was the contour of his stocky, curly head, close to a girl. If Clara would hurry up and come, to relieve the awful emptiness of her room! She rubbed at her nose, wind and tearreddened, and crawled into bed, too wretched even to put a record on the phonograph.

Saturday when the office closed at one, Ethel drifted into the corner drugstore for a soda, with a girl from the next office. Ethel had never traveled much with her—pasty-faced, serious thing—but this Saturday she clung to her,

talking, talking. When the girl left her,—she lived at home, with her folks,—Ethel knew she would be alone for all the hours until Monday morning.

"Well, Eth-el!" Ethel swung around on her stool. "Of all people! I was going out to your house this very afternoon!"

"Why, Mamie!" Ethel spruced into animation. Mamie Scott went with a friend of Jerry's.... "How you been?" Her blonde fairness sparkled between black helmet and silver fur collar.

"Grand. Say, Ethel...." She lowered her voice. "Bill's got a friend in town with a big car that belongs to his firm and some real stuff from Canada, and we're going to step out. You know, dinner at the Chink's, and dance there a while, and then come up to my place. I asked Jerry, just saw him on the street, and he said he'd come. He was awful funny, said you'd gone into a nunnery, taking the gold cure.... I said tell me another. You been giving him the air lately?"

Ethel shrugged, glancing around at her companion. She was paying the check, carefully oblivious.

"He said to ask you if you'd come." Mamie giggled. Said if you wouldn't, to get him another dame. You aren't passing him up, honest? A sheik like that...." She slid her hand under Ethel's arm, her carmined mouth close to Ethel's cheek. "Be good, darlin', and come along. Why, I haven't seen you for ages, and it'll be a grand evening."

Ethel knew it would. She was silent a moment, her eyes on the pink pearls tight around Mamie's creamy neck. The Chink's, dancing, her empty, horribly quiet little room. One last party... why not? Clara would be here in two weeks, but she wasn't here to-night. Just to see Jerry, to dance with her hand doubled soft under his ear.

"I'd love to come, Mamie, only I can't go home with you. I... The doctor says I got to cut out booze, see? Upsets my stomach."

"'At's the girl! We'll drive out for you with Bert's car. He says be sure to get li'l Ethel, for it ain't a real party without her. You won't stay sober long, dearie! What if it

does upset your stomach? Anybody gets that way at times. About seven. Now don't weaken!"

Ethel watched her walk past the store window, coat bumping away from round knees in silk stockings. Those tan zippers are cute, she thought. I'd like to get me a pair. "Oh, good-by." She found the girl from the office regarding her with suspicious, injured eyes, as if she had overheard and disapproved. "Got to run along. Thanks a lot for the soda."

What harm could it do, dinner at the Chink's, in one of the darling little booths; dancing on the rectangle down the middle of the room; crunchy noodles.... God, she had to have some fun! One last time. She ran down the street, dodging cars, and caught a waiting trolley, forgetting the dark, cold wind. When she had ridden a block, she leaped to her feet, demanding to be let off. She'd have to go to the hair-dresser's for a real wave. Why, this was life again, getting ready for an evening. She would come home straight from the Chink's... and Jerry.... He could leave her at the door. That would make it all right.

Late in the evening Jerry's small coupe swung in to the curb in front of the apartment house.

"Sleep, honey?" Ethel heard his voice, and stirred drowsily.

"Cert'ny not." She heard him laugh, and opened heavy lids.

"Where's the key?" He had her beaded bag, his finger poking through it. "Come along, or do I carry you?"

His arm held her tightly as they climbed the steps. A faint disturbing thought thrust its nose just to the surface, just rippling an instant, and sank again. Up the stairway they climbed, the solid house walls flowing like music past Ethel. Jerry opened her door and closed it softly. "Stand still till I make a light." A match flared in his hand, and then the rose lamp glowed. He unfastened her fur coat, let it fall, his hands cold on her shoulders. Then he carried her to the couch and let her down among the pillows, as limp as the doll at her feet.

"I sure never saw anybody pass out quicker than you did, baby." Ethel tried to lift her hand, to tell him something, but he had walked away, out of vision. She heard water running somewhere, clink of glass. What was it she wanted to say? ... Like a moth outside a window, beating soft wings to no avail, some vague thought failed to reach her.

"Here, try a chaser. Wake up and love me a li'l."

He sat on the couch, his arm under her shoulders. She was happy, her hand reaching up to his head, her fingers pressed into his throat. She was happy...lost....

A bell was ringing, as if some one held a stubborn finger against it. The sound pulled at Ethel, like a rope around her throat, drawing her up, up from depths of drugged, heavy-sweet oblivion. A bell was ringing.

"Jerry!" She pounded on his chest. "Jerry! Wake up. Somebody wants to get in."

"Don' want anybody coming in here, baby." Jerry sat up, blinking. The bell rang. He shook himself a little awake. "Now, what the hell, this time of night. Who you expect-ing, huh?"

Ethel propped herself against the wall, staring up at the shiny disks where the clapper whanged insistently. Her head ached, terrifically, and she wished the bell would fly apart.

Jerry stood up, deliberating. "If I go down, they'll know I'm here. You wouldn't like that. If you click the button and let 'em in, they'll know it jus' the same. Better let 'em ring. Oh, shut up!" He frowned at the busy clapper.

"Maybe it's a telegram and somebody's dead." Ethel stared at him, her lips piteous.

"I'll get dressed and go down, then."

Abruptly the ringing ceased, and the silence after it flowed over Ethel like black water. Who had rung the bell that way? She crept unsteadily to the closet, hunting for a kimono, her head leaden and dizzy.

"If I find out anything, I'll sneak back up and tell you." Jerry pulled on his overcoat, jammed his hat well down. "See you to-morrow." He glanced at her, huddled on the couch. "Better get some sleep, or you'll sure feel cock-

eyed. 'Bye, kid.' Ethel held her breath faintly as he opened the door. Nothing there. Whoever had rung was outside, downstairs, in the black cold of the winter night... or morning. She dozed presently, and when she woke pale sunshine lay across the floor, blurring the light from the lamp. Her mouth was fuzzy, and her head still ached. As if it rang too faintly for mortal ear, she heard the bell. No, it wasn't ringing now.

At twelve it really did ring. Jerry, shaven, spruce, with a bunch of yellow roses for her, and a queer, sardonic look about his mouth.

"Well, how's my baby? You sure went wild last night, kid."

Ethel nodded. "I ought to've known better than go to that party."

"Good going down." Jerry kissed her and walked toward the phonograph.

"Jerry." Ethel stood against the door, the roses in her hands. "Wasn't it funny, that bell ringing. Did you see anybody?"

"Um." He snapped the needle carelessly down, and the music whined madly into a start. "Yeh. I thought I'd wait till morning to tell you, though."

"Was it a telegram?"

"No."

"Well, tell me!"

"You see, I don't know just how you'll take it. Way I see it, it's all right, and you ain't got a thing to regret, but you women take things queer, and you been acting so damned funny, I don't know."

"What you mean, Jerry?"

"Yeh. It was her, Clara. Seems she'd started off on a joy ride with a fellow and then got cold feet. First week end party, I guess. Guess she meant to ditch her man. Well, I went down too soon, and she saw me. She was standing there, giving the fellow some line, and when she saw me she climbed right in his buggy. Well, I couldn't deny who I was, and I couldn't let her come up here and see you till

you snapped out of it, could I? Anyway, she wasn't thinking of coming, soon's she saw me." Jerry swung the needle back to the opening bars. *Who...who...do you love...*

"What did she do, Jerry?"

"Well, I'm telling you. Soon's she saw me, she kinda laughed, and climbed right in beside her man. He was oldish, I couldn't see much of him. Of course, I was kinda lit myself and couldn't handle the situation so good as usual. But I knew she couldn't come up here. You wouldn't want her, would you, after all you said? He looked like a pretty good guy."

She stared at him, and the green paper about the stems of the roses crackled under her fingers.



GRASSHOPPER'S DIVIDENDS

HOWARD swung his toe to the brake pedal, and the long car slowed at the bend of the road. The first glimpse of the house gave him, as always, a jumble of feelings—affection, irritation, resentment at its amusing lack of proper architecture. Located imposingly on the slope of a hill just where the macadam road angled to begin its long climb, a white frame house of three stories, with a tin roof peaked and gabled, a high porch across the front, the fat cement pillars bizarrely inappropriate—the house expressed his father.

"They haven't painted it lately, have they?" said Adelaide.

Howard set the car too quickly into motion, so that the two children in the deep rear seat went bumping back with giggles.

He knew just how Adelaide felt, just how the fine crescents of her eyebrows lifted. She shared his irritation, with no confusing affection. She hadn't grown up in that house.

He twisted the wheel. Late afternoon sun splintered on chromium headlights and raked nose as the car swung up the steep ascent of a narrow, ash-strewn driveway. A small white dog of terrier inclination exploded from the steps of the porch.

"Same ole dog!" The boy and girl wedged together in

the open window, sleek black head, curly red head. "Same ole dog; same ole house!" they chanted.

"Remember. Don't try to pet him!" warned their mother.

"Hi, Lucy! Here they are at last!" came a shout from the front door. Down the bank slid Howard's father, a stocky little man, ruddy-faced, brush of red hair well grizzled. "Been looking for you all day!" He tore open the door, had both children somehow in his arms, the little redhead squealing as he bounced her to the ground. "How's the boy?" He yelled at the dog to be quiet, and reached an eager, stubby hand in to grasp his son's.

"He doesn't change," thought Howard, "any more than the country round here. If he wouldn't shout so—"

Adelaide was stepping from the car, slim and smart in cool silk, her fair, oval face composed. She turned her cheek politely for a peck from father. Car, wife, children—Howard eased himself out at his side of the car with a momentary impression that his self overflowed the limits of his own being to include as part of himself all these delightful outward evidences. He'd done pretty well.

"Say, you got a new car, and what a bus too!" His father left a print of warm palm on a headlight. A screen door slammed, and his mother hurried across the lawn, head forward eagerly on thin neck, folds of spotted foulard clinging to her sharp knees. "Here's mother!" The father jumped to help her down the bank. "Aren't they swell? Would you believe they belonged to us?"

"You make more noise than the dog, Frank Wells!" She laughed, a catch of excitement in the soft sound, and prolonged her greetings, savoring the lovely moment. The children. Adelaide. Then Howard; her cool, roughened fingers on his face. "Well, mother!" He spoke gently, humoring the tension of her embrace.

Yes, they'd had a good trip. Four days on the road, up around the lakes, down the Hudson. More than three hundred miles to-day. No, they weren't tired. Easy driving. Children old enough to enjoy the trip. Yes, Jim had shot up, and Lucille was growing fast. They'd better get the bags out so he could put the car away.

"Here, I'll have to back my car out, till you see where yours'll go. I didn't count on a locomotive like that. Can you make the turn?"

"Nothing but a bicycle can make that turn," grunted Howard.

His father had started on a run, ashes scattering under his feet. Two years ago, on the previous visit, Howard had barked off part of the door. Nobody but his father would have placed a garage just where the hillside grew steep, so that you had to bend a car in the middle to negotiate a turn sharper than a right angle.

Howard lifted the luggage out—smart wardrobe suitcases for him and Adelaide, small bags for each child. He knew how to manage on one of these motor trips; not a wrinkle.

From the garage came chatters and grindings, smoke puffed through the door, and with a roar out lunged a high, antique touring car, curveting periously backward up between apple trees. "Hi, Jimmy! Stick a block under her front wheel!"

"Grandpa's climbing a tree!" Jimmy ran to find a block.

Howard caught a swift glance from Adelaide—half humorous deplored of all this bustle and impetuousness. The next moment Mr. Wells, Senior, was back, seizing two suitcases, staggering as he took the shortest cut up the bank.

"You and the children come on in the house." Mrs. Wells had the little girl's hand. . . . "She does look like her grandpa, with that hair. . . . Supper's all ready."

"Don't be long, Howard," called back Adelaide. Then he heard her diminishing voice as she followed his mother. "Father still rushes so, doesn't he? At his age."

Howard climbed into his car, frowning. Not that he didn't know how his wife felt. He agreed with her, to a point. But she needn't let mother know. He eyed the problem of the turn at the garage door. When he first came home, all this warm affection rushed up inside, submerging common sense and criticism. He maneuvered the car, an inch ahead, two inches back, grinding at the wheel, until, a trifle heated about the jowls, he had the tail in line with

the doors. His father danced beside the car, brandishing his arms, shouting directions.

"You swept out that garage floor lately?" Howard eyed the interior reflected in the windshield mirror—work-benches under the windows littered with tools for any occupation whatever, wheel-barrow, grindstone, bushel basket on its side with three kittens nuzzling a tabby. Perhaps a few more bits of litter since his boyhood. "I picked up two nails here last time."

"You must 'a' brought them with you." Frank Wells grinned at his son, his blue eyes bright and shrewd. "Ah, in she goes, the baby. No room for mine. She can stay out. Come along. Let's see you all together."

Howard stood beside his father, looking down at the grayish crest, at the coat wrinkled over stocky shoulders. The older man nodded up at him. "Yes, you look fine. No prodigal son about you, is there?" He laughed. "You'd say it was the other way. Prodigal father. Well, you're a fine man. Business still good?"

"Couldn't be better. So good I oughtn't to take a holiday, but last year we didn't get East. Got to beat it right back, of course."

"You just came. We won't talk about going yet—not till you've dusted off a chair on those pants of yours. Kinda full, aren't they? I remember when you wouldn't wear knickers another day. Had to buy you long pants. . . . Come along. Your mother'll yank out my hair if we don't hustle."

They walked together up the wide steps, the white dog showing his teeth at Howard, beating his stump of a tail once for his master. The cement pillar nearest Howard had a long dark crack, and the chintz cushions on the chairs were faded.

The interior of the house flowed out in a familiar, musty, sweetish odor as Howard entered the dark hall.

He saw his face dimly in the speckled mirror under the stuffed antlered head, and stumbled against a suitcase his father had dropped at the foot of the stairs. Roses on the table, crowded into a glass vase. "Mother still has luck with her roses, does she?"

"Of course I do." Lucy hovered at the door, quiet delight in her dark eyes. "Now, you wash your hands and come to supper. You must be starved." She hurried off, her thin body curving like a sickle, like a bow. A domestic sickle, cutting swaths in housework, thought Howard, as he climbed the carpeted stairs, suitcases in hands.

Adelaide stood before an old walnut dresser, patting into place the smooth wave of her pale hair. "Howard," she whispered urgently, "you must explain we've got to go right on to-morrow. Your mother thinks we've come for a long visit."

"I'll tell her. Later." Howard was gruff. Not that he wanted to stay. He knew that after a few hours his irritations would float up to the surface of this inundation of affection. He wanted them to think he wanted to stay. That was it.

They sat at supper, the six of them, around the table. The cloth was an old damask, thin with many washings. Like his mother's face, thought Howard, that fine, white, thin-smooth texture.

"You have lots more to eat than we do," announced Jimmy, inspecting the crowded surface of the table. "It looks as if we'd all get enough. Pickles an' jelly an' —"

"Grandma puts everything on at once," said Adelaide. "She hasn't a maid to help wait on us."

"You need an extra pair of feet to put on style," said Howard.

"Who's got an extra pair of feet?" Jimmy giggled. "Excepting the dog. I like it better this way."

"Sh, Jim. Eat your supper." Howard added, for his mother, "You've remembered everything I like best, haven't you?" [Adelaide needn't patronize country ways.] He began an account of a recent big deal, talking fluently. They liked to hear about his business. They made a good audience, so that his monologue grew animated. All about how he'd got the inside dope on the location of a new parkway, persuaded the aldermen to swing it a mile south, bought up the best land along its course just outside the city, dirt cheap. Several farms, the owners eager to sell out and move to

town. He'd laid out roads, planned a model suburb, sold more than half the lots already.

He leaned forward, moving boat-shaped side dishes into place to make a map—golf club, gas station, community hall.

"Smart of you, I guess, fooling the men that owned the land." Frank Wells ducked his head, his eyes sharp under shaggy brows. "Did them up pretty brown. Just farmers."

"They got all they asked."

"Wonder what they think of you now."

"Great suffering cats, pa!" An old antagonism boiled up in Howard. "If I'm smarter than the next fellow, do I care what he thinks of me?"

"I like land to live on, not to dicker with."

Lucy Wells rose, her thin hands fluttering. "Have another glass of cider, Howard." [And don't argue—not to-night—her tone begged.] "Father took the apples to the mill yesterday—some of those yellow transparents." She filled the glass. "You remember how you used to begin eating them in June?"

"No, the children mustn't have any more, mother," said Adelaide.

"All right, mother." Howard relaxed, twisting the glass to shake from the golden liquid its sweet-tart fragrance. "Father can hint I should look out for the other fellow. It's each man for himself in this year nineteen twenty-nine, believe me, and the devil get the hindmost. But he won't get me."

Lucy Wells slipped again into her chair. "The neighbors have been asking about you, Howard. You going to have time to see some of them, I hope. Chauncey Earl is back. He said, just this morning when he came up for milk, that he'd like to see you."

"Take Chauncey!" Howard's father tipped his chair back, hooked his thumbs under his suspenders, his voice still choleric. "Look at him! His father left him well fixed. He sold off everything for a song. You know, that land along the lake. Couple of city fellows cut up the land into sandwiches, built cheap log cabins, cleared out with their jeans

lined with money. Chauncey went to town to make his fortune. He's wiped dry, busted flat; his wife is sick; he's living in the basement of the Cooper house down the road, free."

"Chauncey always was a fool. A man gets what he deserves in this world. If he has brains and uses them—"

"Things happen to folks sometimes, Howard," interposed his mother.

"The things that happen to folks are all of a piece with the folks they happen to, mother." Howard was firm. He glanced at Adelaide, found her bright approval a mirror for himself. "Don't ask me to be sentimental about the misfortunes weaklings and incompetents bring on themselves. Look!" He broke off, laughing. "The baby's asleep."

The red head was a wilted poppy; the russet lashes swept a jelly-smeared cheek. Frank Wells pushed back his chair softly.

"She's got good sense, going to sleep so that she wouldn't have to listen to this nonsense. Here, I'll tote her upstairs for you." He picked up the child, her curls rolled under his chin, and he tiptoed away.

"I'll have to undress her." Adelaide folded her napkin and slipped it through a silver ring. "Jim, aren't you sleepy too?"

"Aw, mother! She's just a baby. I want to go outdoors and look around!"

"You come help me with the chores." Frank Wells had come quickly back. "How's that? . . . It's sorta warm upstairs, Adelaide, but if you leave the doors all open, the breeze will get through." He took his grandson's elbow and whisked him out through the kitchen.

When Adelaide had gone upstairs Howard stood in the bay window of the dining room, a window he remembered in winter filled with rows of geraniums, begonias, ferns, and that trailing white one—star of—was it star of Bethlehem? He busied himself cutting the end of a cigar, while his mother moved about the table, piling dishes together. When she had a pyramid of china in her hands, she came closer to him, her mouth moving before she spoke.

"Your father didn't mean to criticize you, exactly," she said. "He's worried, himself. I expect he's going to tell you. I —" Her eyes, wide-set, looked almost black as the pupils expanded; the thin lids had a shell luster. "If you wouldn't blame him too much. He's too generous, that's all. Anything he's asked for—you know! But he's a good man. He's proud of you, even if he is quick tempered."

"Don't you worry, mother." Howard held a match to the cigar, puffed. "I won't get into a battle—not when I'm here so short a time. We have to go along to-morrow, you know. I must get back." He couldn't keep a note of apology out of his voice. But he couldn't loaf—not these days. Adelaide didn't like to stay. She always said: "We make so much work for your mother." "It's good to be here, but business is business."

"To-morrow?" Lucy's chin trembled over the cup that topped her pyramid. "I thought—" She turned, and the arc of her body hurried into the kitchen.

Howard stared out of the window. The breeze lifted the limp curtains, let them fall, giving him an intermittent triangle of vision, where a dark hill sloped vaguely toward a sky still pale with twilight. That was the big orchard hill. Suddenly Howard felt it in his feet, in the muscles of his calves, as, barefoot, he climbed through the coarse grass, toes rounding over bruised windfalls, squudging into forgotten and rotted apples. Late fall, that would be. Now the trees must be growing heavy as the fruit swelled, altering the lines of the boughs, bending them into low arches of fruition.

The dog yapped somewhere outside, and under the window stood his father and his son, the light from the ceiling lamp silvering the man's hair, making a white pear of the small face of the boy. "Want to walk down to Chauncey's? I got a quart of milk for his wife."

"Come on, dad." The boy jumped. "It's swell outdoors."

As Howard went toward the door he thought he would like his son to climb barefoot up a sloping hillside where apples had grown.

In the valley over which the house looked, there was a

smell of mist as the cool river breeze dropped into warm hollows of the land.

"I've got most of my garden over there this year." Frank Wells sniffed the air. "Smell those tomatoes?" They strolled along the road, three abreast, the little boy striding wide to keep step.

Down the hill they went. Howard could see the bulk of the Cooper house, a large, mansard-roofed building, dimly white behind the great, sweeping willows. Only near the ground was there a rectangle of light, warm yellow light from an oil lamp.

"Rest of the house is shut," said Frank Wells. "Chauncey takes care of it—all its rats and mortgages and prospects of the Cooper heirs."

Howard remembered his youthful awe of old Madame Cooper, driving out behind two black horses.

Chauncey came to the door, a tall man stooping a little, a dark beard curling on his chin, indecision in his manner. His wife had gone to bed. "Well, well! Hello, Howard!" Behind him, the unshaded kerosene lamp made a round spot of glory on the damp plaster of the ceiling, showed up stove, oilcloth-covered table, sagging cot, and books piled in corners.

"We're just camping." Chauncey waved a hand behind him. "I'd say come in, but Fanny's just dropped off. I'll walk along with you."

Howard took hold of his son's small, warm, hard hand, to keep a living contact with his present. All around him as they walked the contours of the land against the dark sky, the half-guessed, half-seen mass of a building behind trees, the way the road swung steadily toward the left—all these were like perfect rimes fitting the expectation started by memory. He knew these things.

Just so, in August, that reddish star—once he knew its name—hung in the south beyond the swamp, so that by walking slowly along the road he could sink it behind Jed Barrows' house, could pretend the kitchen lamp was the star.

"Guess you've had better luck than I did." Chauncey's

voice broke the concentration on the moment when the star should reappear in the kitchen. "At least, we hear you're prosperous."

"It's not luck. I've worked hard." Howard gripped his son's hand. "What I've got, I've earned." His voice was harsh over the distant clicking of crickets. "Tough luck, though"—funny how the word persisted!—"your wife being sick. This is a good place to spend the summer."

"And winter," said his father. "Best place in the world. You have everything you need in life, and time to enjoy it.... By the way, Chaunce, I saw Campbell to-day." He went on with a story about a horse Campbell wanted to farm out. If Chaunce took him, he could plow up that back lot, put it into winter wheat.

They came to the bend in the road near the lake. In the quietness a fish leaped, a silver sound. "I used to skate here, winters," Howard told his son. "I fell in once." His father embellished the story, and Jim pulled away from Howard to tease his grandfather for more.

The grandfather and the little boy jogged ahead on the homeward journey, the boy's thin voice, the older man's deep emphasis floating back. Chauncey talked; he didn't know what he'd done if it hadn't been for Howard's folks. No, he had no real plans yet. They were comfortable. Howard listened, the past in which he walked subduing the ironic contempt a fellow like Chauncey provoked in him. They stood again at the picket fence, beyond which the basement lamp glowed yellow.

"Well, see you again. 'Night.... Tell Campbell I'd like the horse, Frank. I'm much obliged."

Adelaide was sitting on the front porch. "Where have you been? It's long past Jim's bedtime."

Jim was important. "We had a real walk, mother. We walked along in the dark and talked."

"Well, walk along upstairs now." Adelaide pushed him ahead of her, the screen door rattling shut.

"Turn off that porch light, Adelaide, so the bugs won't pester us." Frank Wells sat down on the steps, head back against the cracked pillar. Howard creaked into a chair.

"The boy says you're going in the morning."

"Yes," said Howard reluctantly. "Got to go back."

"Like to have you stay. Goes without saying, I guess."

"I'd like to stay." He would, too, in a way. Far down beyond the rim of hills marking the other side of the valley came the whistle of a train, a sound muted by distance into a strange evidence of man—whoo-oo, whee-oo.

"I might as well get it out." Frank Wells cleared his throat, clumped a foot on the step. "I'm up a stump." He went on brusquely, angrily, with details, and Howard, listening, rocked back sharply into H. Wells, realtor, successful business man. Taxes, interest on the mortgage, a note at the bank. The way his father told it, you'd think it was all the fault of other people. County and state demanding higher and higher taxes, and for what? Interest too high, no consideration—

"I can't see," interrupted Howard, "what you've done with all that money. You've had it."

"I haven't got it now. I thought the bank would adjust the interest on the mortgage and the taxes, issue a new mortgage. They did, three years ago. Now they won't, and I know why. Some city fellow wants this place. It's the prettiest site in the county."

"Why not sell off the hill orchard? It's near enough to the city—"

"You think your mother and me want a parcel of jibbering week-enders under our windows? What you thinking of?"

"Common sense. That's all."

Frank Wells got clumsily to his feet, and stood a moment beside Howard's chair. "Just as you like," he said. "If you don't feel you've got any cash, okey. I'll find some way out. Always did. There's more to living than just common sense."

"I can't see"—Howard felt exasperation heat his face—"what you've done with it all."

"We have to live, don't we? Crops don't bring much. Nothing in hay this year. Lucy's brother out West was sick.

Chaunce—I don't know. If the bank hadn't got this notion—”

“It's the same story, dad.” Howard was crisp. “Of course, I'll help out. But if you'd only—” He broke off as his mother's light step crossed the hall.

“Oh, there you are.” She came out slowly. “Adelaide's gone to bed. She was tired, she said.... It's a pretty night, isn't it?” She looked down across the valley.

“Here, Lucy.” Frank scraped a wicker chair toward her. “Sit down.” He plopped down behind her on an old swinging divan—one he had made of a cot bed and lengths of chain.

“Did you ever notice,” said Lucy, “how your father placed the house so you get the bit of river between those two hills? I can see the evening star up to the minute it sets.”

“Funny,” said Howard. “Now, in town, you never think about evening stars. Once in a while the moon surprises you, that's all.”

They were silent a while, except for the squeak of chain as Frank Wells swung back and forth. Then Howard spoke, egged on by the restlessness of his father, by the softness of the night, by his mother's silence.

“I'll have to see what I can do about this mess of father's. If you'll send me an itemized list of what's due—and put it all down too—The sensible thing would be to sell the whole place. It's nothing but an expense, and the market's good enough now, so you might have—well, say an annuity tucked away where you couldn't give it all away.”

“But where would we live?” Lucy Wells spoke with a quiet tolerance, as if Howard couldn't recognize his complete absurdity.

“Live!” bellowed Frank Wells. “We'll live right here on the ground we own!”

“You don't own it. The fellow with the mortgage—”

“He didn't buy it. He lent me money. You—you make me so damned mad!”

“Frank, hush.” Lucy twisted in her chair. “Howard just meant from a business point of view. He sells so many houses he wasn't thinking about how we feel.”

"I was trying to suggest common sense." Howard rose, slapping at a mosquito. "No use arguing. We've been over it before. Send me the items and I'll do as much as I can afford. I better get to bed. Adelaide'll need her sleep, if we're to make an early start." At the door he paused, their silence blurring his justifiable irritation. "I wish we could stay a while. Anyway, we did manage to get here this year, and you saw the children.... Well, good night."

Climbing the stairs, he thought: "Now, why did I drag that up again, about selling? Just makes him mad. Where would they be, I'd like to know, if I didn't use sense in my own affairs?"

Adelaide's voice came from the opposite side of the dark room, where she stood at the window.

"I thought you were never coming," she sighed. "This screen is broken, and if you turn on the light the place will be horrible with mosquitoes. I undressed in the bathroom."

"I know my way around in the dark, anyhow."

The water trickled slowly into the bowl. The spring, high on the hillside, which his father had piped down for the house sometimes petered out in late summer. Howard could remember when his father had finished installing that bathroom—secondhand fixtures, a boy to help screw pipe lengths together, shrieks of excitement when the water actually flowed from a faucet on the second floor of the house. Now it gurgled and gulped when Howard pried the stopper from the bowl. Makeshifts. Incredible, childish enthusiasm over clumsy results. He wondered, unexpectedly, if his father had ever been bored, ever had dull days.

Adelaide was in bed. Howard stretched out, and they both laughed as they slid inevitably together in the concave middle of the bumpy mattress. Howard pulled himself back to the edge, hooked an ankle over the side.

"I was glad you told them they ought to sell," murmured Adelaide. "I couldn't help hearing. The porch is right under the window, and your father hollered. How much is he trying to get out of you this time?"

"Not much." Resentment leaped at her words. "Just some taxes."

"They have so much land. No one would take the house as a gift, of course."

"Not while they're alive. It's the apple of their eye."

"You're too good to them, Howard. If your father can't manage, he ought at least to take your advice."

"Easy to say that." Adelaide was right, and he agreed with her, but what could he do? "It's not so warm to-night, is it? Ought to be a good day to-morrow."

Adelaide laughed softly. "You're so funny. You're firm about most things."

"Well, I learned that when I was a boy, hating the hit-or-miss way things went here."

His father and mother were coming upstairs, his father setting down his feet with ponderous caution. Mother had told him to be quiet. Presently the house was still. On the front porch the white dog played a loud flea tattoo with a hind leg. Then there was no sound in the whole dark night. Howard stared at the window space. Queer how you could tell sky from walls, even in the dark. So quiet it was that when a star made a fleeting line of gold across the space as it fell, he thought he heard its swish through the air.

Adelaide was asleep. Natural enough for her to think he was being soft. People had to take consequences in this world. His father, so far, always managed to find some one who would catch the consequence by the throat and hold it while he skipped around a corner and escaped. Couldn't do it forever. "I'll write to the bank," thought Howard drowsily, "and ask an opinion of the land. If—" But sleep twisted the dial ever so little, words drifted away, and he thought he was walking barefoot under apple trees.

II

Howard stared at Adelaide's averted face, and past her through the window of the Hudson River train, the grime on the glass toning into monotonous gray the bare trees, the patches of snow, the empty signboards along the track. Adelaide looked tired, smudges under her eyes, a line deepened at the corner of her mouth. A straggle of hair from

the roll under her black hat reproached him; she had been letting her hair grow; she needed a permanent wave, and he couldn't pay for it. He rocked one leg over the other knee. That limp end of fine, light hair became a taunt, an accusation.

"I wish we had written, or wired yesterday." Adelaide spoke almost without movement of lips or throat. They had talked, the two of them, in hopeless spirals, until the forming of a word seemed a futile effort.

"I never dreamed they'd have the phone taken out. I couldn't write. I thought I'd just call up from New York."

"I just wish they knew we were coming."

"I wrote last week we might have to." Howard stopped, trying to ease out the exasperation in his voice. Everything nagged him into anger, and it wasn't fair to Adelaide. Like being pounded into such a total bruise that a finger touch hurt. "Father wrote me we're welcome. He means it too."

"I know." Adelaide turned her face quickly. "He does mean it. He ought to. If you could get back all you've given them!" Her fingers busied themselves along the roll of hair, tucking that lock into place.

"If I could get back anything anywhere!" The train slowed, stopped at a station. A morning train down to the city stood on the opposite tracks, men masked in newspapers behind the windows, more men, a few women, climbing aboard. "Some people still go to work."

"And so will you, soon." Adelaide reached for his hand. "After all"—her voice deepened—"it's lucky we've got a place to come to, where you can rest. The doctor said a few months and you'd be ready for the battle again."

Howard gripped her fingers. "You said it, old girl." The conductor strolled through the coach, empty except for their seat, nodding at them genially as the train jerked again into motion. Howard slumped against the arm of the wicker seat and let his head loll back. He was tired. Incredible that he, Howard Wells, was riding back to his father's house in a slow morning train, disheveled and rumpled from a preposterous trip by bus from Michigan.

Over three years since he had last come East, and with a

difference. "Aw, take us along, dad!" That was Jimmy, gangly, quiet, doing well in high school. You still thought the children ought to go to school, in spite of the way the world had cracked up. Adelaide's sister could keep them, if Howard paid a little for their food. "There's no high school anywhere near grandpa's, Jim. Next summer, if we're still there, we'll see you get there too. You look after your sister, eh?"

If that last bank hadn't closed he might have pulled through. "Lucky we have a place to go," Adelaide had said. Lucky. Against his closed eyelids, ripples on the surface of his tired mind, moved incredible images. Headlines in papers, bread lines on the street, lines, crowds of people with fear-distorted faces on the sidewalk around a bank. You'd think real estate was a real business, wouldn't you? Look at the name—real estate. Less than four years ago he thought he was worth half a million. Well, lots of people had agreed with him that summer after the first smash that things had hit bottom, and now was the time to buy. The nerves in his leg twitched, and helplessly he kicked the air.

"Howard!" Adelaide pulled at his sleeve. "You scare me, shutting up your eyes that way." She moved closer to him, and the fragrance of powder she always used crept at him through the dull warmth of the car. "Are we almost there? I never rode up the Hudson this way before."

"The funny thing is"—Howard stared at her—"I can't see where I went wrong. I thought I was being sensible, prudent." The words broke through, like the leap of a fish, scattering the ripples on the surface of his mind.

"Howard, darling, stop thinking! It's no good."

"It's only that coming back home again, I can't help it."

"Is this our station?" The conductor poked his head into the car, shouted at them. Howard peered through the grimy window. The water tower, the bridge across the tracks; he seized the suitcase at his feet.

Outside, the morning kept the grayness the coach window had accented. A wind from the north swept grayness

and whitecaps down the river, blew water rawness through coats.

The station agent ducked into the lee of the small building, eyeing them with curiosity. No, there wasn't any taxi. Not enough folks got off the trains. Where'd they want to get to? The Wells place. His wind-reddened face under the dented visor of his cap sharpened into livelier curiosity. Customers, eh? Going to bid it up? Fellow down the road had a flivver. He'd ring up, see if he'd drive them over.

Howard grabbed at the wrinkled sleeve as the man turned.

"Whatcha mean—bid it up?"

"Why, say, I know you now. You're Frank's son! Didn't know you right off. Got here in the nick of time, eh?"

"For what, man?" Anger plucked at Howard's nerves, hummed in his ears, "Damn it, stop hinting!"

"Mean you don't know?" The man's nose twitched at the drama. "Sale this morning, foreclosure. Yes, sir, just in time."

Howard rocked back on his heels, the suitcase thudded against the brick wall. "Hah!" His breath tore out in a laugh. "Did you hear that, Adelaide? That's good. Just in time. We've come home just in the nick—" He stopped, hearing his own shrillness. He longed to go on in a roar of crazy laughter, but Adelaide's face, puckered, flushed, as if she huddled tight within herself against further shock, steadied him. The poor kid! "Call up that fellow, will you? We'd like to get there."

"I'll wait inside," said Adelaide. "It's so penetrating—that wind." She followed the agent into the station. Howard, hands clenched inside his pockets, walked the length of the platform, wheeled, walked back. No use talking now. When you hit the end, what was there to say? His father had not given the least hint of trouble since—when was it? The events of the past three years wouldn't stay in proper sequence for Howard. They moved in jagged pieces upon one another, fragments of glass in a child's kaleidoscope, confuting time. Soon after the fall of 1929, probably, when Howard had written his father that he couldn't help him out—not this time. Not another word from his father. Howard

swung on his heel again. Phrases stalked through his head, his feet whacked the old boards of the platform. "Father needn't have brought things to this pass. I kept him afloat all these years. Different, my being wiped out. No use going back over it all to try to find the point where I might have done something else." [He had shuttled desperately over the whole affair so often that his mind was rutted in blind alleys. If he started, he slid into the same blind ruts, wearing them deeper. A kind of disease, this feverish shuttling. "Leave it alone," the doctor had said. "You used your best judgment, and it wasn't good enough. Nobody's was. Stop chewing it over. Go work on the farm a while."]

And now there wouldn't be a farm. If his father had ever had a grain of common sense, if he'd ever saved a penny—Howard rocked his elbows, his hands burrowing in the overcoat pockets. He found satisfaction in his anger, a momentary reassurance that somewhere in the crazy world there was an example to prove that the things he had lived by still were true. If his father had been thrifty, provident—

"Howard!" Adelaide called from the door. "The man says we're to walk up the hill. The ice makes it bad for a car."

"Chauncey ought to be along about now." The station agent shoved his cap back, scratching behind one ear with a stub of pencil. "He got stuck on that hill a few days back."

"Chauncey Earl?" Howard picked up the suitcase. "He got a car?"

"Well, it's got four wheels that go 'round sometimes." His chuckle followed as they started the climb, walking at the edge of the ditch, where dry grass offered a foothold. A film of ice, frozen fog perhaps, blackened the macadam.

"If your father had only told you." Adelaide walked ahead of Howard, her face hidden under the roll of fur collar. "We might have saved our carfare. He must have known, mustn't he? I've been trying to think why he didn't tell you. I suppose he didn't expect it would really happen. He's scraped past so often."

"He didn't tell us, and here we are." Howard shifted the

heavy suitcase to the other hand. "It's the last utterly diabolical twist of the screw. Lucky to have a place, were we? Going, going, gone! Where'll we go? What'll—And Chauncey Earl drives to meet us. Lord, it's funny. Why don't you laugh, Adelaide?" The wind stroked his forehead like a wet hand. Queer, too, how he was sweating. Scarcely enough of a climb—

Adelaide turned her head an instant, lower lip caught between her teeth. "There's a car by that empty house."

Chauncey waved to them and drove out into the road, headed home.

"How're you, Howard?" He leaned out, his eyes sober and gentle above the dark curling beard. "Pleased to meetcha, Mrs. Wells. Climb right in.... The other side. That door's broken. Well, I was surprised when Burke called up for me to come get you folks. I sent word over to your father. He was kinda busy, or he might of come."

Howard stared at the stooped shoulders ahead of him, clumsy in an old sheepskin coat. Chauncey's voice had an apologetic tremolo.

"Burke said he told you about the sale." He slumped under the wheel, and with an explosive shudder the car started. Chauncey went on talking, but the wind blew his words into the clatter and roar of the car. Adelaide gasped as they slewed on an icy curve, but Chauncey only spread his elbows wide and drove faster. Howard swallowed a metallic bitterness on his tongue. Chauncey was feeling sorry for him—for Howard Wells! That was the meaning of the way the fellow looked out of his brown dog eyes. Howard shivered as the raw wind whipped through the torn side curtains. The country needed snow to hide its bareness; the thin patches of old snow were like mold on decaying fields, and the hedges were a withered straggle of branches.

"Your folks weren't expecting you!" Chauncey shouted over his shoulder. He drove more slowly the final familiar stretch of road. "Too bad, coming just to-day. Everybody's sort of worked up. Third foreclosure since Christmas right round here. And they all like Frank and Lucy."

"Why, see all the cars!" exclaimed Adelaide. The road ahead was bordered with them, drawn up at rakish angles; the lane that climbed to the Wells place was clogged with them. In front of the gabled, dingy house, men stood about, huddled into heavy coats, backs to the wind like a drove of horses.

"I'll have to let you out here." Chauncey skidded to a stop opposite the Cooper house. "Would you rather come into my place?" He climbed out, his voice hesitant.

"No.... Come on, Adelaide." Howard straightened his chilled body. "Might as well get into this funeral." He started across the road. He hadn't known so many people would share the catastrophe. He had lost his own house, the rest of his property, on paper, just signing his name, not in a crowd of men.

His father shouted from the steps and burst down through the groups of men, arms waving, gray crest bristling.

"Hello, Howie! Hello, hello!" He had both Howard's hands, pumping them. "Adelaide! Lord, I'm glad you're here! Come on! Mother's crying, she's so glad you've come! Hurray!" He whirled between them, hooked them one on each arm, and hustled them across the frozen ground, past the waiting men. "You know my boy Howard! And Adelaide!" he sang out, his voice keening with excitement. He caught his foot on the rush mat at the door, swung unsteadily on Howard's arm, righted himself.

"At-a-boy, Frank! Better lay off that hard cedar!... How're yuh, Howie? Just in time for the fun."

"Fun!" Howard spat out the word. He knew that man-old Bragg—whose farm touched his father's. Did they think this was a county fair? What kind of cruel mockery gave the scene this fantastic mood? He pushed into the hall, and his mother clung to him with thin, taut hands, her eyelids tear-swollen. She looked the way one should at such a time. Had his father gone crazy, and the neighbors too? Or were they jeering at him, that he returned helpless to act, that after his years of success he was worse off than any of them, worse off than when he had been just Frank Wells' boy?

"Come out here and get warm." His mother led them past the living room, where women were sitting, their faces all turned toward the door, an expression of suspended chatter, of curiosity and warmth, giving them a strange homogeneity. "I've made you coffee."

Howard watched her. The arc of her thin body had deepened, as if time had shortened the cord of the bow. "Why didn't you let me know?" he cried. "Before it came to this!"

"You were having your own troubles," she said, bringing him the filled cup. "Your father thought he'd find a way out. He always has managed."

"Listen to them!" Around the house, the shouts and laughter—deep, gusty laughter—lifted a wall of sound which shut Howard into a grim space of outrage. "He's out there too—father—as bad as the rest. They're like maniacs!"

"I don't know what they're up to." His mother's quietness collected for Howard a fringe of the countless times through all the years when she had been thus quiet about what Frank was up to. "I just hope they won't go too far. They might better laugh than cry."

"Lucy! Look out here!" A plumpish woman vibrated at the doorway, pattered across to the dining-room bay window, and after her, giggling, chattering, pushed the other women. Howard saw his mother doff her composed identity, scarlet tingeing her cheek bones, as she ran toward the massed women. They moved aside for her, surrounded her, and above them geraniums and begonias teetered on their shelves. Adelaide, with a puzzled glance at Howard, irresistibly hurried across the room, standing on tiptoe. Howard saw the plump woman slip an arm about Adelaide, draw her into the excited, giggling mass.

They had shut Howard out in a quick solidarity of sex and feeling. He couldn't elbow through them; he couldn't see past them. The back entry had a little window.

A snarl from a dark corner startled him. The dog, shut away from this fandango. "Shut up, Tim," said Howard. He and the dog were isolated in proper sanity. He kicked aside a chopping block and looked through the window.

Up the hillside the apple trees lifted the grotesque patterns of their branches against the gray sky, and in the foreground men whirled about, their gestures as grotesque. They had dragged from the barn an ancient drinking trough, wooden, iron-bound, and now a dozen of them made a line down which traveled buckets of water from the hydrant in the garage. A little man in a gray overcoat that flapped about his knees watched with brisk uneasiness. He pulled papers from his pocket, thrust them back, shook a protesting fist.

"Now, if you don't take our bids, in you go!" The words floated away in a great, good-natured shout. "Up on your soap box!" They swept him along, shoved him up on the box at the end of the trough. "See how she rocks!" Two of them jostled the box, and the little man grabbed at a head to steady himself.

Incredible, preposterous, and strangely moving. A burlesque. A farce. It couldn't be legal. Five cents. Ten cents. A quarter. They were bidding, with jeers, with roars of laughter. Howard gripped the rough sill, staring out. It wasn't legal. It was more than that. It was human.

These men yelled at his father, they clapped his shoulders, they were solid around him. They wouldn't see him done under.

The agent threw up his hands in exasperation, he toppled, and with a mad jump landed just beyond the black water of the trough. "Have it your own way!" he screamed into their laughter. "Have it your own way! I'm done!" He scurried to a black coupé parked in front of the garage, stared wildly at the road packed with cars, and with another wild gesture hurled himself in. Squawking with his horn, grinding at the starter, he wheeled the car straight across the yard, his face a grimace of determination, dodged a tree, and bumped over the low curbing onto the hill road.

The crowd fell silent, and the laboring of the engine on the hill grew fainter, died away. They looked at one another a trifle sheepishly; they stomped heavy boots; they said, "It'll be a long time before he tries any more foreclosures around here—not till things get smoothed out,"

and, "Guess we couldn't have ole Frank sold down the river." Accomplishment had sobered them, had returned them to themselves.

"Howard, where are you?" Adelaide called to him, came running, her face flushed out of its clear pallor. "They stopped the sale! They—just because they like your father!"

Howard flung out an arm, his hand flopping, limp-wristed, as if he relinquished something long held.

"It's only temporary," he said, entreating her. "Nothing's settled."

"But it's—it's different from anything I've thought."

"You mean it couldn't have happened to us that way?"

Adelaide nodded, her eyes large with tears. "Go tell him it's grand."

Howard walked slowly toward his father. Nothing had been settled, his thought insisted. But something remarkable had happened. He needed to find words for it. His father saw him, grinned at him.

"Well, Howie. Things did work out, didn't they? All we need to do is hang on a while."

He pounded Howard's shoulder with a hard, exultant fist.

"It doesn't make sense," thought Howard. His shoulder tingled from the whacking fist, and suddenly the tingle spread through his veins, a warm infusion. He looked at his father, stocky, rumpled, ruddy. For the first time, Howard felt his affection for the man flood through him, with no back eddies of irritation. His father had something more potent than common sense or foresight.

"Come on, Howie." His father pounced at him. "We got to celebrate. Help me lug up that keg of cider." He dragged Howard toward the open cellar bulkhead. "This is our lucky day."



SECOND FIDDLE

CAROLINE replaced the telephone gingerly, as if it might fly up and bite her again. For it was like a bite, Stanley's voice so insultingly polite! "Have a pleasant evening with your mother. I'm going to stay here. Oh, I'll get some work done." Then, before she could answer, the final click.

"Was that Stanley, darling?" Her mother stood in the doorway, one hand at her throat in a quick gesture of dismay. "Is anything wrong?"

"Of course not." Caroline pushed her face into a smile. "Stanley just said he wouldn't be home to-night. Work, you know. He stays at the University." For a moment she met her mother's eyes, for an instant she let herself lean toward the significant compassion in lifted brows, in silent mouth. Then, hastily, she flung out a dust-cloud of words. "He's had that room for his work ever since John was born, because a baby in a little apartment does interfere with writing papers and everything. (She mustn't let her mother suspect that Stanley was acting so!) This time of year, too, he has lots of extra work, graduate papers and things."

"All work and no play, you know." Mrs. Garrett came on into the living room, her small, blunt-fingered hands folded softly against her black dress, her dark head drooping on the firm, creamy throat. "You are quite, quite sure that it's not because of me? I can't help being sensitive—"

Caroline saw the quiver about the lips, the submission in the drooping head. Surely it wasn't asking much of Stanley to be nice to any one as sweet and valiant as her mother! Such a short time since Father had died, only a month since Mother had come east to visit them. "Don't be silly, Mother!" Caroline jumped to her feet, a gay briskness in her voice, while a swift arrow of resentment shot toward the distant Stanley. "See, we have the whole evening to ourselves. What would you like to do?"

"I just want my little girl to be happy. That's all I ask."

Caroline slid past her. She didn't, suddenly, wish to be enclosed in a warm embrace. Too dangerous, with all these feelings lying around near the surface. "I'll tell Hattie there'll be just us for dinner."

"Caroline!" Her mother's voice, less plaintive, halted her. "See if Hattie won't stay with John this evening. That picture is still on, the one we didn't see last night."

Caroline went slowly along the hall to the kitchen, fragments of last night rattling in her mind. All day jagged pieces of it had stuck into her. Nothing had happened, really, but it all had been dreadful. Her mother suggested the picture. Stanley had said nothing. Some one would have to stay home, because of the baby. Then later, when Caroline went in to tuck John up, Stanley followed, and in what he thought was a safe undertone, said, "Why can't you go to the movies in the daytime? Your mother has you all day. I'd like—" Caroline said, "Sh!" but her mother was at the doorway, a patient, stricken look on her face. Without a word she retreated to her own room, and when Caroline, with discomfort out of proportion to the value of any movie, urged her to come, she said, gently, "Certainly not. If Stanley wants you for anything—" And Stanley had kept his square, sandy head bent over a book the whole miserable evening.

Hattie was just lifting a roasting pan from the oven, and the aroma of gold-brown chicken ached like a reproach in Caroline's throat. Stanley's favorite dish! "Sure too bad that man go'n miss a good meal." Her broad, black face glistened. Yessum, she could stay with Johnny a while.

Caroline stopped a moment in the dining room, staring at the round table set for three. She would leave it, as a symbol of Stanley's inconsiderateness. "I hope you won't grudge me a crumb or two of my daughter," Mother had said when she came. Stanley had laughed, then. Caroline shook out the silk curtains at the window and watched the westering sun strike a tranquil golden chime on the treetops of the wooded hill which the apartment faced. The peace mocked at the feeling of strain behind her eyeballs. They had moved out here to the edge of the city for the air and space Stanley couldn't afford in town. As her mother said, "Of course Stanley goes in to the city every day. It's only you—"

A sharp "Wam-wam!" sounded from a bedroom. "Wa-am! Wa-a-am!" Caroline listened. That was John's experimental summons, not a trouble cry. As she entered the hallway, she saw her mother darting ahead of her. "Mother!" she called. "Don't pick him up!"

"Nonsense." The black silk swooshed through the door. "Did him want his Gwamma?" Caroline stood in the doorway. John clung to the footrail of his iron crib, his plump rear humped, his face screwed pink for another wail. Mrs. Garrett swung him into her arms, kissing the little duck-tail of fair hair on the crest of his head, soothing him. He opened his blue eyes and stared at Caroline with a comical expression of triumph. "See! He was calling me." Mrs. Garrett's dark eyes shimmered with tears. "If any one wants me—"

"It's just that I've been training him—" began Caroline. "Any baby wants to be loved before he goes to sleep. I know all about these discipline theories. Your father had them, too. But I loved you."

John was adorable, doubling a fist under his grandmother's chin, relaxing in a sleepy huddle in her arms. (She's spoiling John, Stanley had said. Did she spoil you, Carol? Is that what's the trouble?) Easier to say, "Dinner's ready, Mother, and if we're going out—"

"He'll be sound asleep in a minute." Mrs. Garrett began to hum, "Sleepy lit-tel fellow, everybody knows—"

He wasn't asleep in a minute, nor yet in five, and finally Mrs. Garrett ate her dessert beside his crib, interspersing this little pig went to market with bites of apple pie.

"You see," tried Caroline, when they at last stood in the hallway, waiting for the elevator. "If you don't answer when he calls—"

"I didn't mind tending him at all, darling." Mrs. Garrett was blithe. "He was lonely, that's all." She tucked her hand under Caroline's arm. "I've told you about that time when you were a baby—" They stepped into the car, and the story waited till they reached the street. "Your father insisted I should let you cry it out. Why, finally I just had hysterics myself. I couldn't bear it. I was sick two days. He never interfered again."

As they walked down the hillside in the quiet dusk, a queer and shadowy dismay followed Caroline, like a timid dog, never quite reaching her, never completely seen. She had always loved her mother, hadn't she? Not her father, a cold, stern man. Selfish, too, her mother had said. Stanley thought little John should be trained. "Tears are such a rotten way to get things. He's not too young to learn better, Carol." Hysterics and tears. But her mother was so gentle and loving.

"Isn't this perfect, Caroline? As if nothing had changed. The two of us, running off to spend a few hours—"

The trouble was—there came the padding of that following hound—that Caroline couldn't help liking it better without Stanley, just for the evening. That was Stanley's fault, because he made things so difficult. The lurking criticism in his eyes, glinting under sandy lashes; the little jerk of muscles under his eye, which meant he was irritated or antagonized. Why, if she loved them both, couldn't they get on with each other? Here they were at the theater; she hurled a final stone after that dismay. She would enjoy the evening, anyway.

"About half way down, in the middle, on an aisle." Her mother's crisp order to the usher reduced Caroline to a child, trailing after her down the dim aisle. She held fur, gloves, purse, while her mother settled herself with little

preenings and pats, finally subsiding with her shoulder snuggled against Caroline's. "Isn't this nice, darling?"

But as Caroline relaxed into that old self, a child pleased to be with her mother, Stanley began to intrude. The news reel flashed a London street, a crowd waiting outside the gates of Buckminster Palace, and Caroline walked away from those gates with Stanley, through Green Park, and dark, long-fleeced sheep lifted solemn black faces to stare as they passed. What a year that had been! Stanley had really swept her off her feet straight onto the boat for England. Caroline had been teaching at a private school in Connecticut, only because she could find nothing nearer home. Stanley, Professor Stanley Potter, coming to town twice a week to lecture, meeting her, sharing the romantic excitement of his fellowship for foreign study with her. Why, there hadn't been time to hear any one's protests. "How can I let my little girl go so far away?"

She had been lonely, but she'd pretended she wasn't, after that first time Stanley found her crying. She could see his face now, much clearer than the picture of some flyer's wrecked plane. Disapproval in his firm lips, in his steady gaze. (He had been all sympathy at first, thinking she was ill.) "You know I have to do this work, Carol. Have you no resources yourself? What a baby you are!" He had turned to unwrap crackling paper from the flowers he had brought her, cut hyacinths from a flower barrow near the British Museum where he spent his days. Their fragrance tingled through Caroline on a wave of shamed anger. (No man ever understands how a woman feels, said her mother. And Stanley,—being sorry for one's self is the lowest form of amusement.) Caroline had never before been ashamed of feeling wretched.

The feature picture flicked along, and voices gave metallic versions of human emotions. Caroline recognized it presently as an adaptation of a play she and Stanley had seen in the fall. The young man would leave his seductive and mercenary wife for a mistress who stood for art and pure love. They had argued about it on the long subway trip home. Caroline had been puzzled by its reversal of

values. Stanley said, "The fellow that wrote it is after reality. We feel too much respect for forms—marriage, families. Have to take the lid off and look inside."

Mrs. Garrett pushed her shoulder against Caroline as the young man, having pinned the check to the mantel, walked out of the house with the announcement that he was going to his real wife. "How disgusting! I didn't know it was one of these modern things. Wrecking his career and his home for the sake of that woman!" She rose in her seat, cocking her head about as if in search for some one to accuse further. "Now a good play would show how he suffered for his evil nature." She allowed Caroline to fold the silver fox about her shoulders, and trotted up the aisle, brushing past more leisurely departures.

Stanley would be amused at that, thought Caroline, following through the bright lobby. I'm glad he didn't hear her! She herself had accepted Stanley's comment, but after all, wasn't there something in her mother's attitude? A little guiltily she swung in an arc between the two, as her mother chattered on in a story Caroline remembered from her youth, of a doctor who had left his lovely wife and run away with a woman. "He died in South America," she ended, triumphantly. "Her mother brought up the children. She was living with them."

Perhaps that's why he ran away, darted in an oblique smudge across Caroline's mind. That was the sort of thing Stanley would say.

"Are you tired, dear? You're so quiet. I hope you aren't worried about Stanley's not coming home?"

"Of course not. Here, we turn up this way. Was I quiet?" Caroline began a hasty story about trying to drive down the hill after a sleet storm.

"I don't think you should live way out here," was Mrs. Garrett's reply. "You see it is dangerous. And if I weren't here, you'd be alone tonight. A nice little place near the university, where you'd have pleasant neighbors, and your husband wouldn't have any excuse not to come home. Why, even the picture theater isn't very good out here."

"Well, pictures—Stanley doesn't care about them."

"You see!" (Was it lack of breath from the climb that made her snappy?) "Everything is what Stanley wants! I don't like to say anything, but—"

Caroline looked up at the curved bulk of the apartment building they approached. In the crescent courtyard a fountain tinkled, and lights shone in iron lanterns over the entrances. "I like it here," she protested.

"My poor little girl!" sighed her mother.

Caroline was silent. But while they rode up to the fifth floor, while she listened to Hattie's report of how John never stirred and Mr. Potter telephoned but didn't say nothing, while her mother kissed her good-night with significant tenderness, there floated in the hollows of her mind a little fog of doubt. She shut herself into her own room, moving softly lest she waken John, tipping the shaded table light to keep the shadow over his crib. Why, she'd even moved the baby in here with her, so that Stanley could sleep in the morning. And here Stanley wouldn't even come home! He'd telephoned just to discover what she was doing. The doubt-fog rose, distorting Caroline's thoughts. Didn't Stanley get his own way about everything? Her soft mouth trembled, and she stared at her reflection, her brown eyes dark with pity for her confusion. After all, her mother loved her, and if she thought—

She undressed slowly, her movements weighted with bewilderment. She did love Stanley. She was a little afraid of that bright contempt of his. Had she tried too hard to make herself over? (You've changed, her mother had said. You seem older.) Wasn't it selfish of him, being so difficult? She crept forlornly into bed, thumping the pillow into a lump under her head. It would be nice to go into her mother's room, to cry a little on her shoulder. The door-knob clicked, and Caroline felt her skin washed over with cold, as if that fog engulfed her.

"Caroline, darling?" Her mother tiptoed in. "Are you all right?"

Caroline lay still, while feeling, like drops of quicksilver, rolled toward her mother, rolled back into a dark center. "I was almost asleep," she murmured. When her mother

had closed the door, she turned her face against the pillow. Why she had refused that comfort she did not know.

The next morning, with John in his benign mood of starting a new day, with sun on the new bright leaves of the box trees in the court, Caroline, pulling on a fresh yellow frock, decided that she had indulged in a foolish humor the previous evening. Things would work out all right. Stanley would be home for luncheon—this was Saturday. If he wanted a good walk around the hills—Caroline braced her shoulders—she'd just say to her mother, Now you sit down with a good book and we'll be home soon. It was two weeks ago that her mother had suggested going along. Caroline's cheeks grew warm. "If you're going farther, I'll just sit here and wait for you." That was about a mile along the trail. The two of them had gone on, Caroline walking fast and faster until Stanley said, "We might as well turn back. You're just rushing to get this over." They had met Mrs. Garrett, her face agitated, her hand clutched at her breathless side. A rough man—where *had* they gone! She didn't think Caroline ought to walk so far. Last Saturday had been rainy. If I just say, "We always take a walk," surely—Caroline could feel herself already a trifle guilty. But that gentle expectancy of her mother meant only that she was lonely, that she liked to be with them, with Caroline.

She buttoned blue rompers on John, and taking his hand, started the morning journey to the front door for milk and paper. John swung each sanded foot for a delighted plump, the adventure of standing on his hind legs being still new. He grabbed the folded paper and made a rush for the kitchen, using speed to defeat treacherous gravity, chanting, "Pape-pop, Pape-pop!" Caroline, following with the milk bottles, heard her mother, "Gwam's precious! Come here. Give Gwamma the paper."

John clutched the paper, red determination on his face. Caroline lifted him into his high-chair. Funny, how even the paper waved a shred of discomfort. Stanley, trying to read it while he drank coffee. Her mother, hurt because Stanley didn't respond to her bright talk. "Pop'll be home

soon, John. We'll put the paper here, see?" She pried up the small fingers, poked the paper against the window end of the alcove table. "See, breakfast is all ready for us."

Mrs. Garrett brushed the paper to the floor. She meant, Caroline knew, that she didn't want to see it! She proceeded quickly into how had Caroline slept, and she'd slept fairly well, although she woke not knowing where she was nor what had happened. But she tried not to brood.

Caroline was busy inserting a last spoonful of oatmeal into an indifferent John when her mother asked, "Have you any plans for to-day, darling?"

"Why, no." She hadn't, exactly. Just a thought about the afternoon.

"It's such a lovely day, why couldn't we run in town? Hattie will be here. I've seen so little of New York. I need some shoes, and we could have lunch somewhere, and maybe a matinée."

Caroline touched John's chin with a napkin. "Maybe some day next week." She hesitated; her mother had such an anticipatory glow in her eyes. "It's Saturday."

"All the better!" exclaimed her mother. "Bargains in the shops, and the weather is perfect."

"But Stanley will be home."

"Oh." Her mother's face altered, the curve of smile vanishing, the eyes growing lighter as the iris contracted. "I didn't know. Of course I wouldn't interfere. You said you had no plans."

"I haven't." Caroline felt her earlier assurance slipping into the mire of discomfort. "Only Stanley would expect—it's his only free day. Saturday's crowded in town. And I haven't seen to dinner for to-morrow."

"I understand." Mrs. Garrett slid out of the alcove. "It was only a suggestion. I really think you would be better if you got away once in a while. Dragging off on those long walks after working here—"

"I wish you could go in by yourself," said Caroline.

Her mother shook her head. "No," she said, the mono-syllable conveying bereavement and resignation. "No. If

you will get little John ready, I'll take him out. That will leave you free."

Caroline, pulling John's sweater over his head, thought, it's a shame. She would enjoy it so much. Next week I'll try to manage it. "Now you be a good boy." She kissed John's top-knot, and buckled the strap across his stomach. "Ready, Mother?" Mrs. Garrett appeared, a smartly somber figure in black. "Have a good time. Perhaps you'll see that lady again—what was her name? Walsh? The one you were talking with yesterday." She wheeled the cart to the elevator.

"Now don't worry about me." Her mother kissed her, forgivingly. "I won't be lonely." She wedged herself into the elevator beside the cart.

Caroline walked slowly into the quiet apartment. Her awareness of her mother's restrained disappointment buzzed about her gnatlike. But what would Stanley have thought, if he had come home to find her gone? She pulled her fingers distractedly over her temples. If it wasn't one of them, it was the other! She heard Hattie unlock the kitchen door and went with relief to greet her, to pick up the small tasks of the morning. As she worked, consulting with Hattie about food, setting her room in order, sorting the clean laundry, her activity took the place of thought. It could not, however, stop a churning below the level of thought, from which images splashed up. The telegram last March announcing her father's death. Caroline had read it, listening to the sound of the baby's awful breathing. The doctor had just said, "I hope we can prevent pneumonia. But you've got a sick child." Caroline couldn't leave him, not till the breathing had eased and the fever dropped. Then the funeral was over, and her mother had written: "I never needed my daughter so much, but I want to believe you would have come to me if you could." She shouldn't have shown Stanley the letter, but he found her crying. Perhaps the trouble all started there; Stanley had such violent prejudices. "Good God, doesn't she know your child was sick? Is she trying to make you feel guilty?" Later Stanley had been generous about asking her to come.

"She's so lonely, and I can't go out to see her." He had said, "But your brother's right there in the same town, and she has her house." Caroline had tried to explain: "He's married, and Mother's nice to his wife, but it's not the same as a daughter."

"You're married, too," said Stanley. "How long would she stay?"

"I don't know." (How could you say to your mother come for a fortnight?)

There seemed no wisdom churned up, in spite of the splashes. Everything went askew. Even socks! Caroline slid a hand into the foot, spread the gray silk. Stanley joking her—(he really didn't know who had darned the holes!) "What a wart you put on my toe, Carol!" And her mother, her eyes cold with anger, "I was trying to relieve Caroline of some of her tasks. You may be sure I shall never touch your hose again." Caroline rolled the socks into a tight ball and threw it at the drawer. Stanley had looked at her mother, his sandy brows contracted, and the way he said nothing was much worse than words. All such silly things. Nothing large enough to take hold of. At the sound of the telephone bell Caroline let the pile of towels she was counting slide from her knees, and ran across the living room. Stanley! At last.

"Carol? How's everything? (His voice seemed pitched higher than usual: a poor connection, or excitement?) Have you missed me? John all right? Say, Carol, come on in town. I'll meet you at the subway, downtown side, say twelve thirty. That gives you time to dress up, doesn't it? I'll buy you a lunch, anywhere you say. I want to celebrate!"

"Celebrate what?" He sounded so remote, so untouched by the petty complications of life in Arcadia Court.

"I'll tell you when I see you. Step on it, woman. Your best clothes!"

"But, Stanley—" all round Caroline buzzed those gnats, her mother's disappointment—"I thought you'd be home for lunch. I—"

"You mean you won't come?"

"It's such a lovely day for a walk." (How could she say, I refused to go in town with Mother, now I can't go with you.)

"Will you come or not, Caroline?"

(If she could only see his face! He sounded so frightening, so final.)

"Are you there?"

"Stanley, come on out here. I don't see how I can get away."

"I suppose not." Silence at her ear, not even a click.

"Stanley!" Miserably Caroline listened until the roaring of her own blood under the pressure of the hard rubber sounded like doom. She hadn't been in town with Stanley for weeks and weeks. Celebrate what? Something about his book, of course. Oh, she must go! If she said to her mother, "This is so very special. He's worked so long, abroad and here." She dug her finger into the dial, whirling it. Mr. Potter's office, please. Why hadn't she said Yes? "No one answers." She tried the hall where he had his room. A boy's voice said, "Mr. Potter's just gone out."

Perhaps he was coming home. He should be here within an hour. Or was he too furious, with the anger which is the obverse of elation? She heard voices in the outer hall, heard the slam of the elevator door, and with a guilty start, fled away from the telephone stand. At least her mother needn't know. Hattie, flopping a duster over chairs, opened the door, and Mrs. Garrett wheeled in John. Hands gripped over the strap, the boy bounced himself into the room, and Mrs. Garrett, small hat slipping toward one ear, pointed at him. "He's done that all the time, Caroline. I was afraid he'd actually fly out."

"Why, John!" Caroline hauled him plumply out to the floor. "What you doing?"

"Blum!" said John, sitting down hard. He pulled himself up by Caroline's skirt and tried it again, rolling his eyes toward his grandmother.

"Blum yourself," said Caroline. "Teasing Gwamma, are you? Come along." She gave him a finger for a derrick. "Let's get a lunch for you."

"Oh, Caroline," called Mrs. Garrett. "I've had such a nice invitation. That Mrs. Walsh. To drive with her. If I could have a bite early—they start at one. You won't have me on your mind this afternoon, then."

Luncheon was always late on Saturday, because of Stanley. Hattie was beating mayonnaise lustily; she couldn't leave it. Caroline tucked John into his high chair, left him with bread and butter and a mug of milk while she hurried to spread the luncheon cloth and arrange the silver. If she had only known her mother was going! Tea, cold chicken. If she had only caught Stanley when she 'phoned! "Oh, John!" She jumped for the chair, but too late. The mug clattered off the shelf and milk spread in an amazingly large pool over the rug. "You pushed that off!"

"Bad milk." John leaned at a dangerous angle to inspect the pool, his eyes round and disapproving. His little clucking noise was such a ludicrous mimicry of Caroline's "Tchk! tchk!" that she had to laugh as she hurried for a cloth. She wasn't at all sure that he hadn't done it intentionally, to attract her attention. But he watched so solemnly while she washed up the white puddle, and drank his second cupful so docilely, that she had no proof. She carried him, drowsy-sweet, in to his crib. Did it begin as early as that, the need to be noticed? That was the trouble with Stanley, wasn't it, that he wanted all of her swung toward him, to the exclusion of every one else. But Stanley was old enough to understand.

"Caroline, will you fasten this cape at the back?" Her mother, with a busy air of pleasure, revolved. She smoothed the black satin over her firm hips. "Do you like it? You know, black satin would be good with your skin."

"You look very smart." Caroline admired her. "Your lunch is ready."

"Aren't you—" Mrs. Garrett looked at the table. "I suppose you'd rather wait for Stanley, though."

"Hattie didn't have lunch ready." Caroline tried not to apologize.

"It's quite all right, my dear." Mrs. Garrett shook back the cape and poured her tea. "I'm sorry to be any trouble.

But when Mrs. Walsh asked me, I thought that will take me out of the way." Her lids drooped, a kind of brave loneliness like a seal upon them. Then, catching back a sigh, she said, "Mrs. Walsh makes her home with her daughter, and she teaches school. The daughter. They live at the other end of this building. I think you'd like them, Caroline. I haven't met the daughter, but she drives the car. Older than you. Mrs. Walsh understands—but she's had many years to learn to bear her burden. No, no more chicken."

Finally Mrs. Garrett had gone, with a farewell, "Now have a lovely time this afternoon, darling." From the living room windows Caroline could see a stretch of the road up which Stanley should come. She watched for a few minutes. A man came climbing up—not Stanley—short and tight-muscled. Stanley always swung along, tall and loose. But where was he? She might dress, to be ready for their walk. The scarlet jersey that he liked. She hurried with the dressing; he might come any minute. Standing at the mirror she brushed her brown hair into a shining cap; she didn't look quite so woe-begone, with the gay frock and a touch of lip-stick.

At two Caroline sat down to a solitary luncheon. The bright sun reached into the woods on the hillside opposite, separating the massed trees into individual trunks, with distinct shades of green in the leaves. At three she took John down to the courtyard, where she rolled a soft yellow ball for him, her back to the entrance gate. If Stanley came now, he could find her indifferent, occupied. But what a pity—all these hours of gay wind and bright sky.

Stanley's not coming grew more inexcusable as the shadows lengthened across the courtyard, and people began to come home: little boys with baseball bats, women stepping out of sedans with post-bridge chatter, men with golf sticks. Every one had had a pleasant afternoon, every one except Caroline. She tucked John's toys about his feet in the go-cart and wheeled him out to the street. If she walked briskly down the hill and back again she might feel less tragic. But she had suffered a loss, irretrievable, of this day

which might have been lovely. John's head bobbed and he made get-ap noises in his throat as they went down the slope. Faster and faster they went, until Caroline was almost running. At the sharp curve she stopped to get her breath. "Get-ap!" urged John. Then around the curve she saw Stanley, plodding up the hill, head down. Caroline's hands shut hard over the handle of the cart. Her heart thudded its anger at him. Then he lifted his head and Caroline saw the lined grayness of his face change suddenly under a flash of delighted recognition. That clear, straight look of his gray-blue eyes, that quick relaxing of his firm mouth! (He had said once: I don't know why I feel so excited when I see you unexpectedly—it piles everything together in a gorgeous heap.)

"Oh, Stanley!" John lunged forward, waving his arms. "Stanley!" Her face quivered and she couldn't keep back the tears.

"Hello, family." Stanley rubbed his palm over John's head, laid it on Caroline's hand. His face sobered and he waited, inquiringly.

"I thought you'd never come." Caroline swallowed.

Stanley swung the cart around and started up the hill, his hand still over Caroline's. "I thought at first I wouldn't," he said, drily. "But that wasn't very satisfactory."

"I tried to get you, but it was too late. You had gone."

"I suppose it was childish of me, but hang it all, Carol, what's the use of having a wife if you can't celebrate? I'm tired of playing second fiddle." His phrases came out calmly, well rounded, as if they had been thought over until their edges were smooth. "I'm going to be first fiddle from now on."

Caroline had to take quick little steps to keep up with him. "But you are, really, Stanley. You ought to know that."

"How would I know it? Not by what you do." Stanley turned through the entrance gates. The little cart bounced over the flags. "Your mother has you hamstrung. She thinks I'm an interloper, an intruder. I suppose she's sitting up there now in my chair, waiting to look down her nose

at me. You're so afraid of hurting her feelings you don't draw a long breath." At the doorway he stopped, to lift John up to his shoulder. "She's a selfish old woman, and it's pitiful to see the way you stand around for her." With his free hand he yanked the cart into the hallway. "Don't look so shocked! You think I'm being selfish, don't you? All right, I am. But it's the only chance to set you free. She's a—a succubus!" The elevator door clanged open, and Caroline walked into the car, her head held high, her cheeks scarlet, her fingers twisting in the smooth wool of her skirt. She felt dizzy as if Stanley had shaken her until her head spun. John pushed his fist against his father's gray hat, shoving it back, with a pleased Da-da-dad.

She hoped, with a tremor in her knees, that her mother had not come back. Stanley was wound up; he would go right on. He unlocked the apartment door and strode in as if he looked for an opponent.

"Mother went for a ride," said Caroline, in a small voice.

Stanley seated himself with John on one knee and pulled off the sweater, his hands gentle. "You see, Carol? You couldn't leave her for me, but she went off."

"She thought you were coming home." Caroline dropped down on the divan, heavy with confused misery. "Oh, why couldn't you like her, just a little?"

"I don't care to see my wife bullied, if you want to know. She wants you all to herself. She did when you were a girl, didn't she? Kept you off your father. If you hadn't had to earn money, if you hadn't been miles away from her, I'd never had a chance at you. Can't you see, Caroline? I bet she blackguards me in a sweet, dainty way, until you begin to wonder why you never saw what a brute I really am! Well, I'm through stepping out of the way." He rose, deposited John in the deep chair, and crossed to Caroline, standing above her, hands in his pockets, his face crinkled about the eyes and mouth. "Poor kid. See, Carol." He drew out an envelope. "I got us seats for that show, the one you wanted to see. For to-night. Will you come with me? Without this damned feeling of guilt because you are deserting her?" He ran fingers through his stiff, sandy hair,

and the muscle under his eye jerked faintly. "It's special. Thornton told me this morning they'd publish the book."

Caroline lifted one hand to her throat. Stanley's words had sent her scuttling through dark alleys of past years. "It's grand, about the book." She couldn't keep her voice steady. The first big step upward, and when he had called her, she had said no. (What else could she have done? Was it possible, ever, to figure out exact truth in your relation to other people?) "Of course I'll go with you to-night." She had to go, to prove that he was wrong. But was he? What would her mother say?

"Not as a favor to me, Carol." His eyes were cool and shrewd. "Not unless you really want to."

She reached for his hand, with an instinct that touch might be wiser than thought. Just then John, having been too long neglected, wriggled down from the chair with a bump and shriek, and into his tumult broke the ring of the doorbell. "Pick him up, Stanley. It's Mother, I think." Caroline opened the door reluctantly, as if the sight of her mother might prove Stanley right.

"Oh, you are home. I thought perhaps no one would be here." She came in, swinging her fox over one arm, her dark eyes inspecting Caroline and Stanley. "John wants his Gwam!" She hurried toward John, who was being smoothed upright by his father. "Whata matter with my baby?"

"He's all right." Stanley jerked at John's arm. "Come along, fellow. Take a walk."

Mrs. Garrett opened her eyes at Caroline, with a significant, wistful look. "Did you have a good walk?" she asked.

"No." Caroline glanced at Stanley. This was to be a test, to prove that Stanley was wrong. Only why should her skin feel tight, as if her nerve ends had curled up? "No. Stanley just got back. Did you have a nice drive?"

"It was pleasant. The roads were crowded. But the Walshes are delightful people. The daughter is charming. In fact—" She stopped, as Stanley twisted his wrist to examine his watch.

"Oh, yes." Caroline started toward the kitchen. "I must tell Hattie to serve dinner early. We're going in to the theater to-night, Mother. (Quickly, now, before apology edged into her tone.) Stanley's had his book taken, and we are celebrating. (Please, please—it was like a child in her, crying—please see how it is!) You won't mind one evening without us?"

"You mean this evening?" Mrs. Garrett smoothed her fur slowly. "I had no idea—you didn't tell me. It's too bad. You see, I asked the Walshes to drop in. They are eager to meet you."

Caroline looked in dismay at Stanley, who was engrossed in escorting John over a rug.

"You could change the tickets, that is, if you have them?" asked Mrs. Garrett. "The Walshes were so kind to me."

It seemed to Caroline that she had lived through this scene before, not once, but a thousand times, in every intonation, in every hidden flux of emotion. Instead of Stanley, her father stood there, about to withdraw. "It doesn't matter, Adelaide. Have it your own way. I just thought—" Sometimes he would look at Caroline as he went away. When he had gone, the tension which held Caroline would loosen, as her mother's face altered subtly into gentle warmth. "You're sure you prefer it this way, Caroline?"

But Stanley did not fit within this sense of familiar repetition. He had no air of withdrawal. He did not say, "It doesn't matter." Instead he waited, John clinging to his thumb. If he would only look at me, thought Caroline.

"Of course," said her mother, "if you had told me—"

"We didn't know," began Caroline, slowly. She looked at her mother's expectant face; she looked at Stanley's averted, non-committal head. Extraordinarily two selves pried themselves apart, almost with physical sundering, a timorous, conceding self which leaned toward her mother's smile, and a self which tried to step boldly toward Stanley. "The Walshes can come in any time." How loud her voice was! "You'll have to explain to them." Ridiculous, the way she had to shout down that fright! She knew why Stanley wouldn't look at her. He understood that unless she could

break through this fine-spun silken net herself, she never would escape. "Tell them what a big day it is for us, for Stanley and me." Stanley turned his head at last, with a droll lift of eyebrows, of lip corner, a kind of good-humored cheering her on. Mrs. Garrett, her face set, walked slowly to her room and closed the door.

"I'll give this young fellow his dinner," said Stanley, "while you dress up."

It was good of him, thought Caroline, not to crow. She hurried with the change of frock, stopping to listen: not a sound from her mother's room. Caroline stood before the mirror, fastening a string of jade at her throat, brushing her hair shining-smooth. Her mother was waiting for her to come in, tremulous, conciliatory. Caroline could feel the exact mood in muscle fibers. It hurt, this abrupt breaking off—of what—a habit? More than that. It was her childhood which she had kept too long. Her mother was her past life. Stanley was now and all the future.

There was a pleasant excitement about hurrying John into bed, while Stanley stalked about, humming a little off key, as he dressed. Then Caroline knocked at her mother's door.

"No, thank you." Mrs. Garrett's voice was muted; was it pain, or only the closed door? "I don't wish any dinner. My head aches a little."

Stanley drew Caroline along with him. "Look out," he said. "More ways than one to cook a goose." And after dinner, when Caroline in hat and coat stood again at her mother's door, he looked at her from the hallway, his mouth grim.

"Just a second, Stanley." Caroline pushed open the door, left it wide. Her mother sat at the window, head propped on one hand, white, square fingers spread over her eyes. "Can I get you anything, Mother?"

"No, thank you."

"Hattie will stay until we come home," said Caroline, steadily.

Her mother flung down her hand. "I've been sitting here thinking," she said, "that I would go back to my lonely house. To-morrow, perhaps."

Caroline stiffened. Stanley had opened the outer door. This was a final ruse, stirring just a ripple of the old response. "I have to go now. Stanley's waiting. To-morrow we can talk that over." Suddenly a new kind of tenderness, mature, tinged with pity, swept Caroline across the room toward the melancholy figure. "Good night, Mother." She kissed her cheek.

"Coming, Caroline?" called Stanley. "Here's the elevator."

"Yes." Caroline was coming. She walked lightly, savoring the first moments of this new undivided, untroubled self.



STRAINED RELATIONS

MINA's eyes hurried down the first page of the letter, an apprehensive wrinkle between her fawn-colored eyebrows. She peered across the table at Philip. "More coffee?" She reached for his cup, with a glance at the banjo clock on the wall. Twelve minutes till train time. "Finish your oatmeal, Roger." She inspected her two small sons, one each side of the square table. "Are your school bags packed?" Philip, stirring cream into the coffee, had picked up a letter of his own. Hastily Mina turned the folded sheet; she had to hunt for the second page. Grace had the craziest way of writing.

"And, so I'm coming east on this little trip. I need the change and as I'm motoring with these *kind* friends it doesn't cost any more than staying here in this *dreadful* place. They're going just to Philadelphia but perhaps you would like to see your only sister. Of course I haven't the extra carfare but I'll write or wire when I know where we are staying."

Mina's small, sweet mouth shut over an impulse to shout out a violent phrase. She tucked the letter hastily under other envelopes, first of the month envelopes she didn't need to open until she had time to go over accounts. Philip was cramming a letter into his coat pocket. With easy, deliberate movements he pushed back his chair and rose.

"Time to start, boys." His dark eyes lingered on Mina. Somewhere, on the broad space between them, in the deep lines past his firm, wide mouth, she saw a hint of sardonic dismay, almost as if he reflected her corked explosion. Probably his brother again, begging. She was glad it was time to make the usual dash for the train.

She ran through the hall, gathering up her gloves, and after a moment of shouting because Roger couldn't find his cap, they were all aboard the family sedan. Mina swung the car out of their driveway along the pleasant maple shaded street toward the suburban station. As she coasted down the hill to the tracks she heard the train whistle. The flagman waved her across the tracks.

"Now don't worry about your exams." She kissed each of the boys, tucking a lock of John's dark hair under his cap. "Only this week, and school will be over. Oh!" She looked at Philip. "You forgot your paper!"

He slapped his coat pocket. "Here it is. So long, Mina." The edges of her heart curled as she lifted her face for his kiss. That wariness, that fencing between them! "Philip!" she begged, but the train roared down, and the three of them ran along the coach to the step. As she waited for the crossing gates to lift she followed them, more swiftly than they could go, the boys to the second station below where they would pile off and scamper to their school, Philip to the city, where he would walk along an avenue dingy in June sunlight until he turned through revolving doors set wide for the summer and was shot up in an elevator to the offices of the publishing firm where he was an editor. The gates creaked stiffly upright and Mina started up the hill. The car took it slowly; the valves needed grinding or something. She had marketing to do before she went home. Hulda had given her a list. Just ahead of her was Florence Ryder, her white linen outfit effective in the black Packard roadster. Not much of a procession of wives a fair morning like this. Florence waved at her in the mirror. When Mina nosed in near the market, Florence stood waiting for her.

"Hello, there." Sullenness raddled her thin, handsome face. "Got rid of your family? We're going to have an addition

to ours." She swung a wooden-beaded bag in thwacks against her knee. "Not that kind, you sentimental idiot. A mother-in-law. You know Ferd's mother? She hates me as I hate her."

"She's going to live with you?" Mina's pointed face was troubled. She knew how thin of late the marital ice Flo and Ferd stepped on had grown. With additional weight . . .

"So the noble Ferd says. 'You must admit I owe my poor old mother a roof if she is in need.'" Her mimicry was acid. "He may find himself enjoying her company alone."

"Maybe she'll try to be more friendly."

"That dame? Why should losing her money make her decent? She finds fault with everything about me from haircut to cocktails. Oh, Lord, Mina, come along. Let's concentrate on green vegetables." Later when they had finished shopping, she stood beside Mina's car. "Any chance of getting you for bridge this afternoon?"

"Not to-day. Philip brought me three manuscripts last night, and I need the money."

"You're lucky to have a way to make any."

"I don't make much." Mina ground the starter. "And you needn't think," she called, "that you're the only one with family trouble."

Mina drove home the long way, past driveways winding in to the large estates of the suburb. They looked this morning like seed catalogues in color. Dogwood spread its flat drifts of cream and ochre, wistaria drooped with purple bloom, on a hillside a single Judas tree lifted its delicate and elusive color against the intense blue of the sky. It's June, thought Mina, and if it's spoiled I can't bear it! A whole year till another June. It's going to be ruined, if Philip—She drove on swiftly until she turned into her home driveway. The small Tudorish house sat among neatly banked cedars and firs, the comfortable angles of roof and gables sharp above the trees. Mina did not look at it; it fitted into her recognition so precisely that the slightest alteration would have shrieked at her. She called Hulda to help unload the bulky paper bags.

"Native asparagus and spinach for dinner," she announced,

as Hulda's round red arms folded bundles to her broad low bosom. "Remember, four waters for that spinach. Mr. Leigh won't eat it if there's a grain of sand left!"

"Sure." Hulda paddled off on heelless shoes, the two pancakes of braids over her ears shining like butter. Mina sighed. Hulda was good-natured, and she meant well. She cost only half as much as the competent housekeeper Mina had reluctantly let go. When was it? Ages ago, and only last August. Grace had written distractedly that she was penniless, absolutely penniless; Edgar's store had failed, his mother would support him if he came home, and what was she, Grace, to do? Mina couldn't let her sister starve.

She followed Hulda into the kitchen, made a rush for the ironing board where the acrid odor of scorching cotton announced danger to the small blue shirt. She thumped the iron on end and snapped back the heat control.

"Did burn? Hm, hm." Hulda looked at the brown triangle.

"All you have to do, Hulda—" Mina kept her voice low—"is to stand it up and push this button. See? That's a new shirt of Roger's."

"Lucky I been ironing the tail, yes?" Hulda held up the shirt. "See, Mis' Leigh. He jus' tuck it in his little pants, yes? You call, I run."

"It's dangerous to leave an iron. You must never do it again."

"Sure," said Hulda. Then cheerfully, "I been mos' through ironing."

"And it's only Thursday. That's better." Mina's upper lip pushed forward, deepening the center indentation which gave piquancy to her expression. "All I need for luncheon is a salad, so you can finish to-day."

She strolled out of the kitchen, brushing the fine aureole of hair away from her forehead. Where had Philip put the manuscripts? She found the morning letters on a corner of the buffet, moved to the middle of the maple table a yellow bowl in which pansies floated, and crossed the living room to the recessed end in which stood Philip's desk. There they were, three fat manuscripts, bulging under

elastic bands. As she picked them up, her eyes stopped, caught by a small black leather case. Philip had forgotten his checkbook. The pressure of involuntary compulsion drove her hands down until a finger touched it. How much had he been sending that brother. She shifted the papers to one arm, swept the checkbook into a drawer, slammed the drawer shut. Things weren't so bad she had to spy on Philip!

She ought to remind Hulda to go over this room after breakfast. The surfaces of wood lacked the clear luster they should have. An uproarious clatter from the kitchen suggested that Hulda was looking for something. With a shrug Mina went upstairs, as far away as possible.

When she and Philip had built this house, the room at the south with dormer windows had been her study. She hadn't wished to keep the editorial job she held when she met Philip, but they both said, Oh, there'd be all sorts of special work she could do at home. It had dwindled.... Now Roger had the room for his own. John had the one across, originally called the nursery. Roger adored his privacy, and separating the two had put an end to squabbles over possessions. By some miracle Hulda had finished the upstairs work. The glimpses as Mina passed down the hall were pleasant.

At least—she dragged a low chair near the window, piled the manuscripts on a footstool, located a scratch pad and pencil—at least she could read these books. "Find us a best seller," Philip had said. "We need a big book for the fall list. Want to be ready for the upgrade."

Two of the books were by newcomers, one with an excited letter from an agent: "genius of the first water." Mina sniffed the air of her room with its flowered chintz and mahogany, the scent of syringa strong through the window, changed under her nose to the paper-dusty, clacking air of her old office. In those days she had been known for her flair for discoveries. She began to read eagerly, dropping typed pages face down beside her chair.

The telephone rang in the hall below. In a moment Hulda

bellowed, "Mis' Leigh! Oh, Mis' Leigh! Is you somewhere?"

Impatiently Mina scurried together loose sheets and hurried down stairs. She'd like an extension 'phone. Philip, his voice constrained.

"Mina? Say, Mina, Don has just blown in. I know you won't like it, but I'll have to bring him out with me to-night. What did you say?"

Philip needn't have begun that way, putting her on the defensive. If he knew she wouldn't like it, why— "How long is he going to stay?"

"I don't know." His voice came across miles of Arctic ice floes. "If you object, I'll see if I can get him put up at the club. It costs a good deal. And with other expenses—"

He meant Grace! "I didn't say I objected, Philip." Could he even hear her, across the frozen distance? "Of course you'll bring him home. Only what's he doing here? I was just surprised, that's all."

"He's looking for a job. I didn't know he was coming, Mina." A faint tinge of human warmth, a note of apology. "And Mina, you'll be nice to him? He's sort of cut up. I'll tell you about it to-night."

Cut up, was he? Mina banged down the telephone. She'd like to cut him up in little pieces. Coming east on Philip's money, to wheedle more out of him! Handsome, lazy wretch. Philip was positively soft where he was concerned. Just because his mother had said, "Take care of my little boy, Philly." Mina got to her feet, hair flying, eyes brilliant, her whole small body energized with anger. She'd have to see that the guest room was in order.

Half way up the stairs she halted, her hand closing over the rail. Good Heavens, Grace! Both of them in the house at once! She couldn't hurt her only sister just because Philip insisted on bringing his brother home. What a mess! At least Philip couldn't object, as he said. Her mouth grew droll, the upper lip pushed forward. All right. A nice family reunion. Philip can see how he likes it. Where'll I put the two of them? Grace and Don will mix like nothing at all, too.

Late in the afternoon Mina stretched back in her chair, the final page of the second manuscript drifting down on the pile. She closed her lids, and shouts of boys playing ball on the vacant lot across the street floated in with the heavy syringa fragrance. She thought she could distinguish Roger's high, serious note. This second book wasn't much good. Conventional light romance. If somebody would only write about the rest of love, instead of just repeating the beginnings of it. They never went on and told what happened after the plunge: the strange depths of the ocean, the rich life on the ocean bottom, the confusion, the fear, the black caverns,—and the strength which grew with the years. Now, such a book—Mina sat up, rubbing her tired eyes—would be some use! She'd better hurry or she'd be too late for the train.

As she bathed and dressed she wondered how she would like a job again. She felt weary after her hours of work. Of course, in the old days, there had been no house to run, no Hulda, no small boys. She heard them clattering up the stairs, and hurried to shake down over her head the soft green silk frock. A few smart strokes with the brush laid her fair hair smooth over the crown of her head, coaxed it into curls at the nape of her neck.

"Mother! Can we drive down with you?" John pounded at her door.

"Yes." Mina pulled on a white coat with puffed sleeves, glanced at her Kate Greenaway reflection. Well, that was the way you were supposed to look. She opened the door, and found Roger staring mournfully into his room.

"Why must we have visitors?" he asked. "I can't move all my things."

"It's only for a few days, Roger. Aunt Grace has to have the guest room, and so Uncle Don must have yours."

"Let him go sleep with John and see how he likes it," grumbled Roger.

"Let's see what you've done." Mina looked into John's room. Hulda had moved in Roger's work table, and Roger had piled books, shirts, ties, moccasins, and a waste basket upon it. "You aren't going for a trip!"

"I can't decide what I might need." He looked up at her, his face, pointed like hers, with delicate modeling of eye sockets and temples, drawn into a doleful grimace.

Mina gave him a quick hug. "Come on, fellow, don't be a grump. Come on, John." They pelted ahead of her. Probably they'd scrap till Don left—

She sat in the car, watching her sons stalk about the station platform inspecting mail sacks, posters. The bell at the crossing vibrated, the train tore around the curve, its smoke billowing out in a lovely pennant.

Certain small events kept for Mina the quality of a recurrent miracle. One of them was the first glimpse of Philip at the end of a day, as he swung down from the steps of the coach. She had no conscious fear of what might happen during absence, but his reappearance gave her a quiet ease. Don hadn't changed much during the two years since he had last stayed with them. She watched the two men, the boys trotting beside them, as they came toward the car. Don was taller, less substantial, quicker of movement. The elusive resemblance lay somewhere in the broad forehead, the space between the dark eyes. Don's mouth was immature and restless; Philip's strong, subtle.

"Well, Mina!" Don held her hand, admired her aggressively. "Prettier every time I see you! Here's the bad penny again." He lifted his pigskin bag into the rear of the car and climbed in with the two boys, while Philip slid in beside Mina, bulging worn portfolio on his knees.

"Tired?" Mina brushed finger tips across the back of his hand, her glance queried his mood. A little defensive, watching her to see if he needed to pick up a cudgel for his brother. Mina's smile postponed disclosure of herself.

"New car, eh?" Don leaned forward. "What's the mileage?" (Implication of prosperity, thought Mina.)

"Last year," said Philip. "Ten thousand."

"You remember that old horse Father had?" shouted Don. "We used to drive her around. She'd been a race horse, old Firefly." He went on in a lower tone, entrancing the boys.

He is amusing, thought Mina. When he's around you have

to remind yourself what he's really like. Not that he's wicked. Just selfish, spoiled.

"Your house looks charming." He was first out of the car, extending a gallant hand to Mina. "You're lucky to have such a place." His expression was that of a worn Ulysses, gazing from afar at paradise. "We lost ours."

Mina knew. She and Philip had had a bad week before Philip decided Don would have to let it go. His house, was it? About five hundred dollars worth of a fifteen thousand dollar house. Furnished . . . what was the phrase? . . . on income.

"You show Don his room, Philip," she said. "I'm giving him Roger's."

Philip's eyebrows questioned her, but Don was at his heels.

"You boys scrub up for dinner." Mina corralled them toward the stairs.

"Mother, he's going to show us how to ride, if he can get a horse. Where could he get a horse?" John swung his elbows with a loud "Gid-ap!"

"There's the milkman's." Roger frowned at John's antics.

"Run along!" Mina shooed them up the stairs and went out to inspect the dinner table.

"What's the idea, Mina?" Philip stood in the doorway. "Why not give Don the guest room? Wouldn't it be less trouble?"

Mina shifted spoons to the proper place before she glanced up, her mouth puckish. "Well, you see," she began. She moved toward Philip, inserting a finger in a buttonhole of his lapel. "It's really comical, Philip. Please laugh." (Queer how far away Philip seemed, as if Don's presence drew him back into years before she had known him!) "It's Grace. I had a letter."

"I know you did."

"She's driving to Philadelphia, and wants to run up here a few days."

"Really, Mina!" Philip stepped back. "You might have told me."

"I didn't dare." Mina's tone ridiculed her own discomfort.
"Till Don—"

"How on earth can she gallivant around the country on what you give her?"

"That's what is funny." Mina giggled. "Both are liabilities on tour!"

"I told you Don was on the track of a job." Philip's tone was too forebearing. "The boy has been having a rotten deal. His wife's deserted him, gone running home to Mamma because the installment company took away the stuffed chairs and the radio! But your sister—"

"All right. It isn't funny." (You couldn't keep it a joke alone!) "The cases are entirely different. I can't refuse to see Grace, and the guest room is more convenient for a woman, because of the bathroom." Color rose under Mina's thin skin and she turned with specious calmness to tell Hulda dinner could be served.

Dinner moved slowly; Mina felt like an old stern-wheeler, paddling upstream through sluggish conversation. The weather, banks, Congress, beer. Philip contributed an occasional remark; Don had a lot to say, but his glibness didn't last long. Mina found Roger eyeing her under his lashes. He had a disturbing response to undercurrents in the household. The blanc-mange was soft. "Pudding soup," announced John, dripping it from his spoon.

"That's not very polite." Philip frowned.

"Well, lookit!"

"John!" Mina warned him. "You boys may go now. Come back by half past eight."

"Oh, Moth-er! It's light till nine, and—"

"Don't argue!" Philip was stern, and the boys scooted off.

After coffee Philip and Don strolled out of doors. The summer twilight lay golden over trees and stretches of grass. Mina watched the two men out of sight and listlessly returned to the dining room for breakfast plans.

The telephone rang. Mina sat down at the stand. Western Union. Message for Mrs. Philip Leigh. Collect. Mina felt the slight preparatory contraction such news always caused.

The contraction deepened into rigidity as she listened.
"Wire hundred dollars for fine lost license streetcar ran
into auto am in jail love Grace."

A hundred dollars! Oh, good Heavens, I haven't got a hundred dollars! Nobody's got that much this time of day. Grace in jail! Mina's thoughts whirled centrifugally, scattering her in all directions and in vain. She couldn't stir up that much money. She had to. She knew without looking how little was in her purse. Less than ten. Philip—how could she ask him? Florence Ryder—she might! Mina dialed the Ryder number, had to endure cumbersome sparring from Ferd before he would call Florence. Florence was sorry; cleaned out at bridge that afternoon. She'd ask Ferd. (Was Hulda eavesdropping?) Ferd had sixteen, all told. Mina was welcome to it. "What's up?" asked Florence.

"My sister's in some kind of auto mix-up. (Nine and sixteen. Lot of good that would do!) If I can scrape up the rest, I'll drive over for yours." Now where? The stores were closed. Hulda was staring at her, pale blue eyes flat and wide. Desperately Mina called her. "Hulda, you haven't any cash on hand, have you? (The girl didn't believe in banks.) I must wire some to my sister. I could return it to you to-morrow."

"Sure. Been trouble?" Hulda plodded animatedly toward her. "Sure. I keep in good place. How much?"

Mina listened in a whirl of humiliation to Hulda's heavy feet on the rear stairs, to the sound of a key turned in a lock. That was to safeguard the good place. If only Philip didn't come in! Hulda returned, untying knots in a large blue-checked handkerchief, counting out crumpled bills, twenties and tens.

"Don't say anything about it. To-morrow I'll give it back." Although how?

"Sure." Hulda's bland face connived at solidarity for her own sex.

As Mina drove out of the yard, she heard a call. She pressed her toe down and the car shot ahead. She had to drive to the second town to find a telegraph station open. When, after nine, she slid shut the doors of the garage, she

stood peering at the house like a conspirator, to determine where she might make the least conspicuous entrance. The kitchen was dark, and so locked. She'd have to march in the front door. Cigarette smoke drifted through the study windows. Philip and Don had come in, then. As she stole into the hall, bedlam descended upon her from above, a clatter, a banging, a yell. Hastily Mina ran up the stairs. The noise ceased with ominous abruptness. She pushed open the door of John's room, her breath exhausted. The two boys confronted each other, diddling on their toes, glaring like a pair of Bantam cocklings, and on the worktable a pool of black ink spread amœba-like over papers, out to the edge.

"I was making a map." Roger's lips were white. "He joggled my elbow."

"Aw, I just wanted to see and he pushed me." John grinned uneasily.

"Who knocked that over?" Mina was curt.

"He did!" They sang it in chorus.

"Wipe it up quickly, before it drips on the rug." A step on the stairs, along the hall. "Hurry, John!"

"I didn't do it! Coming in here and spoiling my rug an' everything!"

"Did you hear your mother, sir?" They all three jumped. Philip filled the doorway, threatening, and John moved uncertainly toward the table.

"Here." Mina drew out the green blotter. "You might as well use this." She whisked a drop from the corner of Roger's map. "That's not spoiled. Find a cloth and wash the table, John." John rolled a wary eye toward his father and got busy. "Now go to bed, you two, with no more disturbance."

Mina left them, minor culprits, and strolled into the hall.

"I didn't know you'd come back," said Philip, expectantly.

"Oh, yes." (Where have you been, he meant!) Mina looked up flippantly. "I didn't know you were back. Have a nice walk?"

"Didn't you see us as you drove off? I called."

"You did?" (Oh, not to-night, thought Mina, feverishly.)

I can't tell him to-night.) She heard Don in the hall, clearing his throat. Philip looked as somber as if she'd spilt the ink! Don could probably hear every word.

"Well," said Philip, "there was a telegram for you while you were gone."

Mina drooped against the wall, eyebrows flying, comic dismay on her face.

"Don took it. I was up here with the boys." Philip drew an old envelope from his pocket. "It sounds peculiar, but you may understand it. It says, 'Released without fine, don't need hundred, see you soon, love, Grace.' I hope," he added, formally, "that Don got it straight."

"Oh!" cried Mina. "Oh-h!" Don was coming up the stairs, whistling.

"Guess I'll turn in," he said, genially, as his head lifted into sight. "I say, was that message okey? I had the operator repeat it twice."

"Yes." Mina's glance scurried between them. She had to explain! "It's my sister, Grace Wagstaff. She had wired earlier. She was in an accident."

"Whee-oo! Too bad." Don was solicitous. "Glad she's okey." He moved past them, into Roger's room. The latch of the door did not click shut.

"I suppose she wired for money," said Philip, "and you sent it."

"I had to. She was in jail!" Mina wanted to babble the story, to beg for sympathy. But Philip stood off, straight and solid, and that door down the hall swung in the evening breeze. Don would enjoy this!

"Where could you get a hundred this time of night?"

(Oh, Philip! Less like a judge!) Mina made her voice very small. "I borrowed it. But now Grace will send it right back. I've had such a time!"

"You poor kid!" Philip crammed the offending envelope into a pocket, his eyes lighting in quick warmth, one arm reaching toward her.

"Oh, Phil! If you could look here a minute—" Don, collarless, thrust his curly head out of his door. "Here's that prospectus. Just a sec—"

Hands clenched in fury at a moment broken just as it opened to enclose her in warmth of comprehension, Mina watched Philip into Don's room. Had Don deliberately interrupted? He was shrewd enough. Her lids burned with quick tears as she shut herself into her own room. The murmur of voices continued, secretive, excluding her. She heard Don laugh. Miserably she crept into bed. Later she stirred out of drowsiness as a board creaked. Philip, tiptoeing to his own room. He would say, the next morning, "It was so late I knew you were asleep." He was afraid she might ask what Don wanted!

She glittered determinedly through breakfast the next morning. Roger's disposition showed wrinkles which the night had not smoothed out, and when Don made a jocose remark about a drawing, the boy's reply was a mutter.

"What did you say, sir?" demanded Philip.

"I didn't say anything." Roger flushed.

"When you say things you dare not repeat—"

"Oh, that's all right, Phil." Don was magnanimous. "He can't help it if I get nightmares."

Roger pushed his oatmeal bowl an eloquent inch away. Mina knew how he felt! "Hurry up, boys," she said briskly. "Almost time to start." They'd all gone to bed wrong, and mood hangovers were infinitely the worst kind.

Thank goodness Don was going in town with Philip. And then Mina couldn't start the car! She had, in her guilty haste, left the lights on.

"Here, I'm swell at cranking cars." (How she hated Don's joviality!) He and Philip rolled the car out of the garage, Philip with an air of courteous restraint. (If they had been alone, he would have grinned and said, "Well, old Crinkle-top, what were you thinking about?") Instead, once they had the motor running, he said, "Perhaps I better drive. You'll have to be cautious about stalling." She felt just as Roger looked.

Philip turned his head as he tore along the shaded road. "Did you by any chance finish those manuscripts, Mina?"

"Two of them. They're no special good." She could at least be superior about them. "I'll write the reports to-day."

Then, at a spur-prick from the poltergeist of perversity that rode her, "I wonder if I could have the check."

"Certainly." Philip's jaw lengthened. "I'll bring it out to-night. You must need it."

"Trust a woman for that!" came Don's light comment.

As they slid down the hill toward the tracks, the gateman ran out to plant his flag. Philip thrust on the brakes. "Pile out!" he exclaimed. "We can get through on foot." Mina watched the four of them duck under the descending gates. It was a final insult to sit there, the engine throbbing because she didn't dare throttle it down, while cinders rattled on the hood. She had to wait until the gates lifted, in order to turn the car.

The bank wouldn't be open yet. She must return Hulda's money. She'd draw on the household account. Grace would certainly send back the hundred by to-morrow, Mina assured herself stoutly. She didn't see Florence nor the black roadster anywhere. That meant another real scrap. She didn't blame Florence. With other people in your house, there was no leeway for swinging at your domestic mooring with the tide. Instead, the small craft bumped and scraped. As Mina turned into the main street, a red pterodactyl of an oil truck shot backwards from an alley. Mina grabbed at the emergency brake, sat with quivering knees while the truck driver leered at her and thundered away. Don't stall, Philip had said. Mina giggled. Honks assaulted her from the rear. She stepped out, looked helpless, and presently the constable and a few drafted bystanders had pushed the car in to the curb. The mechanic at the garage was indifferent. All the rental batteries were out, and the other fellows, too, on a wrecking job. He'd try to get it sometime to-day.

Mina walked to the markets. They'd have to deliver. Couldn't promise till afternoon, way out there. spitefully she purchased fish for dinner. No one liked fish, but it was cheap, and if you had extra people to feed— She hated the flat, glazed eyes of the fish, the strong odor of scales and blood floating in the warm air.

She walked slowly home. The still air was heavy with

fragrance of blossoms; a glaze obscured the brilliance of the sky, almost saffron-hued beyond the trees, the color of a storm brewing. Much too warm for June. The city would be unpleasant. Philip hated the heat.

Hulda had attacked the living room, and the vibration of the vacuum cleaner as she ran it lustily back and forth over one spot in the rug shook the house. Mina plodded up the stairs, and shutting herself into her own room, tried to defeat the vacuum machine with her typewriter. The heat, the saffron sky, dead fish eyes, chagrin, helped her to deal caustically with romance.

In the middle of the morning and in the middle of a good sentence, she remembered that she had not gone to the bank. Perhaps—hopefully—Grace would get that hundred back, and the household funds could stay undisturbed. What if that car had been wrecked? Had Grace been driving? Her thoughts were noisier than that cleaner. Hulda must have removed the last scrap of nap from every rug. What, now, had she intended for the rest of that sentence?

By midafternoon she could see white thunderheads rolling up in the northwest, marshmallow-like. The air was as motionless as if the earth had ceased to revolve; if wind moved those clouds, it was too remote for human sensation. She was glad when she heard the boys' shout as they rushed into the house: "Moth-er!"

"Mother, we passed all right!" John clattered up the stairs, loud in triumph. Roger, behind him, lifted a face brilliant with release. "And Roger was almost the best!" John exploded with pride. "An' there's a picnic!"

Mina hugged them. It was this very pride John felt in his older brother that made him such a pest at times. "Good boys," she said. "Change your clothes before you go out. Don't go too far away. A storm's coming up."

She heard them chattering as they stripped off school suits, and reflected that their day had turned out better than hers. Part of Roger's irritability had been strain over these exams. Perhaps Philip too had something on his mind, and she only imagined it was relative trouble.

As she started to sort out the sheets of the final book, she

heard a car stop in front of the house. John, in khaki shorts and baseball shirt pelted down the stairs. Had the garage found a battery? No. A woman's voice. "Put them here in the hall. You didn't *say* it would be extra. I *never* pay extra at home." And then, "Hello, Roger, come kiss your Aunt Grace."

With a recurrence in her knees of the near-collision feeling of the morning, Mina went down to the lower hall. "Why, Grace! What a surprise!"

"Mina, darling!" Grace kissed her heartily. Her fair, plump face was heat-flushed, her white turban askew, her flowered chiffon plastered over plump arms and breast. "What a dreadful trip! What an experience I've had! Let me sit down." Busily she unbuckled a white pump, wriggled her toes free. "Roger, could you get your auntie a drink? Oh, it's John! A cold drink?"

Mina motioned him to hurry. She looked at her sister, looked at the pile of luggage draped with a white polo coat, somewhat dingy. She remembered, against her will, a comment Philip had made. "Grace makes me think of a reflection of you in one of those Coney Island mirrors, you know, the convex kind. She's enough like you to make me uneasy."

"You don't look very glad to see me." Grace dabbed at her nose with a grayish wisp from a vanity case. "I hope—" distantly—"it's not inconvenient."

"Of course not, Grace." Roger peered gloomily down through the balustrade. "Roger, come speak to Aunt Grace, and help John carry the bags."

Roger squirmed under Grace's "How he's grown!" He escaped with a suitcase, John after him with a hatbox, and before Mina had escorted Grace to the guest room, she heard the two of them stealing down the rear stairs.

Grace stroked the taffeta bed spread, examined the toilet articles on the glass topped dressing table. "You have a lovely house, Mina." Her breast heaved. "I had no idea!" She pulled off her turban and patted her waved hair. "Servants, too? I look a wreck, and no wonder!"

"I have Hulda." Mina thought: I'm hypersensitive.

"You certainly are lucky." Grace lifted a suitcase to a

chair. "I'll have to change my shoes. These new ones about killed me to-day."

"However did you carry so much luggage in a car?"

"I didn't." Grace held the lid partly open, feeling within, until her hand dragged out a pair of mules, ostrich tips dejected.

"Do tell me—" Mina settled herself near a window, pushing back the glazed chintz curtain in search of air—"what has been happening to you."

"Plenty." Grace tipped the mirror over the dressing table. "Perhaps I better take off this dress. It's crumpled, I got so warm. Do you like it?"

"It's quite striking." Mina looked at the orchid and rose floral wreaths. "Do sit down and tell me. Your telegrams—"

"I never was so upset in my life, Mina!" Grace sank down on the bed, wriggling a little, exploring with a thumb along her diaphragm. "There's a bone sticks into me right there. Ugh. Nor so disappointed in people I thought were *friends*. You have to get in trouble to find what folks are really like. Fair weather friends. Huh." She pulled out fragments of the story, tossing them at Mina for her to piece together. At first the trip had been grand, except that the Collinsees stopped at tourist camps. Stingy about money. They were all dead tired when they reached Philadelphia, and as it was Grace's turn to drive, although she never did like traffic, she wasn't going to be a quitter, and this streetcar swung out around a bend, miles away from the track, with a lot of colored workmen on it, and what yelling, it was awful getting mixed up with such low people, wasn't it, and then the Collinsees blamed her, but finally a nice officer found Grace was from Indiana and just let her go, especially as nobody had been hurt, only the fenders crumpled, and she hoped she'd never lay eyes on the Collinsees again.

"Well," said Mina, "I'm glad you weren't hurt. I'm glad you didn't need that hundred dollars, too. I had a time getting it."

"Oh, that!" Grace swung her foot so violently the mule shot off. "I did need it. My suitcase was on the side the streetcar hit, and it was just squashed. Not that there was

much in it." She peered at Mina coaxingly, a dimple in her plump cheek. "I really got that officer not to make me pay the fine—so I saved the money, and I thought—"

Incredulity, complete and numbing, held Mina silent.

"I knew you wouldn't want me to look shabby. I hadn't bought a new dud for two years."

"You spent that money?"

"Why, Mina!" Grace's chin, pointed like Mina's, but curiously inadequate in her round face, quivered. "You gave it to me, didn't you?"

"I borrowed it from Hulda! From my maid! Because you were in jail!"

"Tchk! Tchk! Hasn't Philip—why, I supposed he was doing well." Grace pounced to her feet, and with a dramatic gesture tossed a purse at Mina. "Take it! I never expected my own sister to begrudge—" She spread a chiffon handkerchief over rising snuffles.

Mina slowly counted the contents. Thirteen dollars and thirty-one cents.

"The Collinses said I ought to pay for the car, too," sobbed Grace, "and my nerves are suffering from the shock, and I—oh, dear!"

"You might as well stop that noise." Mina felt that the distant rumble of thunder came straight from her own depths. This, no doubt, was the way Grace had managed poor Edgar about money. Married women's way. "I told you last summer I could send you fifty dollars a month, no more. If you'd stayed in Centerville you wouldn't have got into this mess! You don't suppose I ask Philip to support you, do you?"

"Cooped up in that awful village!" Grace flourished the gay handkerchief. "I had to have a change. You have everything! Who will support me?"

"You better pull yourself together. Philip will be home soon. His brother is visiting us, too." Mina walked crisply out of the room, her fist closed over thirteen dollars in bills.

If Philip found out! Time to drive to the station, and that car—She telephoned the garage. They'd been too busy

to send for a rental battery, but they had hers on the charger. By morning it ought to be okey.

Well, that was that. Hulda inquired, ominously, if the lady was staying to dinner, too. The fish been not come yet. Mina called the market. Oh, the fish was on the way. Any minute now, ma'am. Mina could see it hopping on its tail. filmed eyes staring. The thunder sounded nearer, and through the window Mina saw lightning streak, pale in the daylight. She felt as if the electricity in the air polarized the cells of her body, giving her a fictitious energy. As she ran upstairs, she heard water running in the guest bath tub. Grace was, evidently, pulling herself together.

When Grace isn't here, thought Mina, as she stripped off her pique frock, I remember how kind she is, how generous, how we used to play together. I can't have a bath: there'd be no hot water for Philip. It's been hot in town. Does Philip feel that way about Don, I wonder? The cold water eased her forehead, cooled her wrists. Ouch, what a crash that was! Suppose the house was struck! Or Philip trudging up the hill from the station. She hurried into her frock, a sleeveless white silk, brushed her hair, which clung with tiny crackles to the brush until she had to smooth it with her hands. The sky hung low and dun, with dark clouds rolling up like smoke.

Below her window started suddenly a queer commotion words, yelps, a crash. Mina stared down, her nose crinkled against the screen. In the middle of the grassy plot lay her birdbath in fragments, the white duck which had stood in it tossed a yard away, yellow feet in the air. Protruding from the syringa were legs, long, gray trousered. "Nice doggy, nice doggy, come here. Come here, I say!" The syringa heaved, and the rear end of Don burst out of the lower branches, drawing after it something on a rope, an enormous animal, white, yellow spotted. Don rocked back on his haunches, so did the dog, A St. Bernard, jowls and drooping eyes mournful even in puppyhood, huge paws planted against further motion. "Hulda!" shouted Don, over his shoulder, "bring me a basin of water. He's thirsty." Mina

heard Hulda's shriek. Dogs and banks she classed together! Hastily Mina went down.

"What in the world?" she began.

"Hello, Mina!" Don rose, brushing off his knees. "Meet Benedict. Listen, I'm sorry about that thing. Benedict wanted a drink. I'll get you another. You haven't got a bone or something, have you? He won't move."

He did move, suddenly, upon Mina, paws at her waist, dripping, loving tongue on her chin.

"He likes you!" cried Don, reproachfully. "Here, Benedict! You're mine!"

Mina backed away. "Where did you get it? What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to take him home with me. Pedigree and all. When I saw him, panting his life away in a miserable shop on Fifth Avenue, I just had to rescue him. He was as lonely as I was. Where shall I tie him?" The puppy spread his shaggy paws and yelped, a ridiculous sound from his wide mouth. "Too hot, isn't it, Benny?" Thunder crackled. "Say, I can't leave him here!"

"You can't bring him in the house," wailed Mina. "Where's Philip?"

"Not even in my room? Have a heart, Mina. Nice doggy. Shut up! I haven't seen Phil since lunch. Got a fellow to drive me out. See, it's raining!"

Mina felt the first drops on her hair. "Put him in the garage."

She stopped in the kitchen entry, shaken by a hysterical impulse to laugh. A St. Bernard, because they were both lonely! With Philip's money. Which was worse, Don or Grace? Hulda needed reassurance as to the age and intentions of the animal before she could discuss dinner. The fish had come, none the better for being so long about it. Thunder made her stomach shut up!

"The rain will cool things off," said Mina. "Do the best you can."

Uneasily she went to the front door. The wind was turning up the maple leaves, showing their pale petticoats; the rain came in spatters of huge drops. Just then a black

roadster shot up the drive, halted showily at the door. The glimpse of the high spirits of her family turned Mina's worry sour. In the rumble perched the two boys, and beside Florence, not the least fatigued nor drenched nor anything except glowing, sat Philip.

"Hello, Mina!" Scarlet earrings dangled into soft white fur at Florence's throat. "My own man's so furious he didn't even come home. So I fetched yours along. You might lend him—you've enough people on hand, I hear."

Absurd to mind. The boys scrambled out, knobby knees scratched and grimy. Philip stepped out, slowly, lowered the heavy rear lid. "Better step on it!" A sudden squall sent the boys scampering into the hall.

"Bye!" She shot off rakishly, cutting down turf at the curve.

"Well, did the old car go dead?" Philip shook drops from his hat, bent absently to kiss Mina. "Lucky Florence came along."

"I wisht we had that kind of a car," said John. "It's more fun."

"Especially in the rain?" asked Mina. "You boys better hurry."

"I hear your sister arrived." The animation was fading from Philip's face.

"Yes, she's here. And Don's here. And Don's new dog. Maybe you'd prefer to go with Florence." His drooping expression dragged that out.

"Maybe I would, if you—" Philip broke off as Grace swept down upon him, high heels tapping. "Why, Philip!"

During the brief conversation which followed Mina suffered a small misery. Philip's politeness had rents through which she detected its sardonic lining. Grace did gush, of course. Why should Mina feel responsible? A survival of childhood, before one's own identity separated itself from that of the family as a whole, perhaps. She welcomed the entrance of Don, stalking in from the kitchen as if he owned the house. He and Grace now met for the first time, with a clash of lances, scenting each other from afar as rivals.

"I didn't know you lived with Philip and Mina," began Grace.

"I thought Mina's sister was way out west."

"I must clean up," said Philip. "The city was filthy today."

Don followed up the stairs. "I have to scrub dog off my paws," he confided to Philip. "Wait till you see him! And was he a bargain! Oh, boy!"

"He looks like Philip, only younger," said Grace, pursing her lips. "He's got that same sarcastic way, too. How long has he been here?"

From overhead Mina caught Philip's accent, incredulous, angry. Hooray! "A day longer than you have," she answered Grace, who ignored the implication.

Dinner would have been funny, Mina knew, if she hadn't been too close. Philip was silent. Casual remarks from the others led to sparring. "Where's Uncle Edgar?" inquired Roger.

"Why, yes, where is Uncle Edgar?" asked Don, genially.

Uncle Edgar was at home on his mother's farm, running it for her. Don thought he was a merchant. Of course, but he'd almost had a breakdown, and had to stay out of doors. Grace herself didn't care for farm life, and, coquettishly, "You know how mothers are about their sons' wives!" Wasn't Don married? Where was his wife and how was she? Home with her mother, too, although not running a farm. Wasn't that a coincidence? (This from Grace.) Both of them here, and both their wives and husbands home with their mothers!

"And we're home with our mother!" John thought that was very funny.

The rain, beating against windows, pounding the roof, made a prison of the house for the evening. Philip sat at his desk, formidable behind papers. The boys didn't want to play checkers, they didn't have any good books to read, they refused suggestions until Mina sent them to bed. What, she wondered, would all the summer days be like, with this house-load? Then, lacing the noise of wind and rain came a new note, plaintive, persistent. Mina watched Don move

casually about the living room with the air of one making an inventory of bric-a-brac, until he edged out of sight. Grace had launched into a story about a milliner at home whose husband looked like Don and ran away with a waitress. Mina thought the moaning had stopped.

Suddenly from the kitchen came a crescendo of shrieks; in through the dining room pounded Hulda, her face a full moon of terror. Behind her, waggling every hair in ecstasy, leaped Benedict, and after him, grabbing for a dangling rope, Don. Hulda barricaded herself in a corner behind the piano. Philip stalked from his study, with a dark air of one to whom the end of endurance has come.

"He won't hurt you, Hulda." Mina reached for the girl's quivering hands, found them sticky with dough. "Don't scream so! He's only a puppy."

"He joomed on me, Mis' Leigh! On my bread I make! Oooh!"

"He was crying so, I just thought I'd bring him in a minute." Don had an arm about the dog's neck. "I didn't know any one could yell so! Good lungs."

"You give me my money, I go home." Hulda shook floury, bedaubed fists. "Too much people and animal. I go home. You give me hundred dollars, Mis' Leigh."

"Come on, boy," said Don. "Let's go." He scuffed the dog over a rug.

"Hunderd dollars," repeated Hulda.

"Do you owe her that much?" asked Philip.

Grace made a chittering sound, like a woodchuck. Mina looked at her, then at Philip, her hands, limp-wristed, open at her sides in a beseeching gesture. "See, Hulda, you're safe now. Come on." She longed for a leash to drag Hulda away with her. "You can wait till morning for your money. The car broke down and I couldn't go to the bank. Please come. I couldn't spare you." She coaxed the girl from her fortress, back to the kitchen, helped to retrieve the bread dough which squatted under the upset board, and finally soothed her up the rear stairs to her room.

As she made an irresolute descent to the front hall Don sidled past her, with a jaunty good night. Grace hovered

at the entrance to the living room. "I don't see how you stand such a maid!" she began. Then, hastily, "I might as well go to bed. I'm worn out!" Hearing no protest, she tapped up the stairs.

Mina waited for the sound of her closing door. Then, slowly, she walked into the alcove where Philip sat. For a moment they stared at each other, separated by cold infinity. "What did that girl mean, a hundred dollars?" asked Philip. "Don't you pay her?"

"I borrowed it." (Out with it, thought Mina. Everything is wrong, anyway.) "To send to Grace, for that fine."

"But she didn't need it."

"She spent it. All but thirteen dollars." Mina brushed unwelcome tears of humiliation from her lashes. "Oh, Philip! What are they doing to us? Not money. Something deeper. We've tried to cover them up, as if each of us belonged more to them than to each other!"

"You mean Don, too?" His dark eyes were speculative. Mina could see what happened behind them, see it from within herself, as he struggled to release himself from a resentful, blind loyalty. "Do you know what he did?"

"The dog, you mean?"

"He spent a hundred and fifty for it. Money I gave him for debts. I guess we're quits, aren't we, Mina?"

"What *are* we going to do?"

He rose quickly, rounded the desk, hooked one finger tentatively about her thumb. "We've been awful fools, eh? Protecting them, concealing their depredations, all these months. I knew you didn't like Don, didn't like my helping him—"

"I couldn't bear to tell you about Grace!"

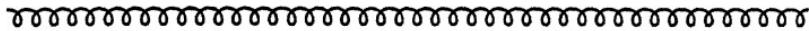
"Let's pack 'em off home to-morrow with a nickel apiece. Let's tell 'em in unison we're through being bamboozled. So much a week to keep them off the breadline."

"Grace could go home with Edgar, only she isn't so comfortable."

"Exactly. And Don could find something to do, only he expects too much. Lord, it's good to talk to you again, Mina!"

"Don't stop!" Mina moved closer to him, lifted one hand to lay it along his cheek, thumb soft on his mouth. "Don't you dare ever stop! I've been scared, Phil!"

"Scared? You've been a thistle, a hornet!" He shook her gently, held her face against his throat, his fingers tugging at her curly hair. "Little fool!" At Mina's laugh he admitted, "A pair of fools!"



NEW PIONEER

ERIC rested his elbows on the table, fingers plowing through his hair; the words on the yellowed pages of the book were grayish curlicues crawling toward the stained margins. The dusty warmth of the library dulled his senses until sleep muffled even his deep boredom. One elbow slipped, he jerked himself upright, knocking a book to the floor, and stared at a girl two tables away. She lifted her smooth brown head and her dark eyes met his for an instant of abstract irritation. Confound it, if she was as absorbed as she pretended, she wouldn't hear a book drop! Funny little thing. He watched her moodily as she bent again over her notebook. Perhaps it was her hair that made her look different. Satin-smooth and soft, drawn back from small ears and broad forehead into a twisted braid at the nape of her neck, a patina laid over it by the shaded desk light; the image had become an annoying obsession, slipping unbidden into his head. Just because she sat over there, where he had to see her. About four every afternoon she came in, like a mole in her brown clothes, and like a mole she burrowed into books, never looking at him except to rebuke him for disturbing her. Fusty little book-mole.

He retrieved the fallen volume and piled books together. He'd done enough for a day, and if he hadn't done much, what difference did it make? Well, he had to slam that drawer to shut it! He scraped his chair over the floor. She

was staring at him, her dark brows drawn together, her mouth uncertain, as if she meant to speak. It might be amusing if she lit into him. Eric shook himself erect, settling his wrinkled Norfolk jacket, and sauntered, tall, loose-muscled, toward her table. She moved a hand forward, a small, firm hand pinched over a fountain pen.

"If you—" she spoke quickly, head tipped back to see him—"if you would try black coffee. It is hard to keep awake after hours of work."

Eric lounged against the table; her voice was soft, pitched lower than he had expected. "Is that what you use?"

"You probably have harder hours than I do." Her eyes were shy and bright. "But you make me sleepy, too, you have to struggle so to keep awake."

"In that case—" Eric lowered his voice as an earnest student at the next table glared over his spectacles—"you might let me offer you the cup of coffee." He had nothing to do until dinner; it might be amusing to talk with the girl. If he had something to put with the image of her head, the image might stop haunting him, as a phrase of music is silenced when you place it where it belongs. "By way of amends." And as she hesitated, "We're fellow sufferers in these dens of learning. That's introduction enough. Come along, do." He took the pen from her fingers, closed the notebook, read the name in round plain writing. "Sarah MacFee. Come on, Sarah MacFee."

Her smile altered the planes of her face; the slight hollows beneath cheekbones vanished, the curve of her generous mouth was sweet. "All right." She swept books and papers into the drawer, dropped the key into a worn brown purse, pulled a knitted cap over her head, the knot of hair making a funny bump at the back, and buttoned her brown coat up to her chin.

She doesn't know how to dress, thought Eric, following her through the stacks to the hall. The cap extinguishes her. Then as she turned toward him, lifting her head, there was a shadow almost golden in the hollow of her round white throat. "The things you know and those you don't know about somebody you see day after day," she said, "are like

a jig-saw puzzle with half the pieces lost. I got to feeling so sorry for you I forgot I didn't know you." She paused for Eric to push open the heavy door. The light from windows lay in barred rectangles on snow, the evergreens shook down snow from weighted branches with a sound just louder than silence, the smell of fresh snow was like water after the close air within the building. "I know a boy," she went on, as Eric shortened his stride to match her step, "who works all night at the railroad lunch counter. He can't stay awake even in class. Is your job at night?"

"No." Eric laughed. Eric Spalding as counter-man! "Is yours?"

"Oh, no. I teach. I'm through by four."

So she was a little school teacher. Eric touched her elbow. "Let's go across here." They had come to the edge of the campus, opposite a block of bright windows, college book store, tea shop, haberdasher's. Not likely that any one he knew would be in the tea shop this time of day. Wilma wouldn't like it. He could see just the way her fine eyebrows would lift, making a caret of disapproval on her pointed face. No, he'd forgotten. It no longer mattered to Wilma what he did.

Sitting in the booth, the narrow wooden table between him and this Sarah MacFee, Eric thought again of Wilma. She could never take off a hat without long moments of absorption in curls and waves. This girl pulled her cap backward with a flick of her hand, and there lay her hair, shaped smooth to the small skull. She was looking at him, her eyes intent. Eric waited, being experienced in women's eyes. In a second her expression would alter, would challenge him, would turn inward considering her own charms, her chances with him. Most feminine eyes were shallow, bits of colored glass behind which tiny self-thoughts darted. But this girl, her dark brows drawn together, was trying not to see how he saw her, but to see him. Eric felt a rippling excitement, as if her scrutiny, the centrifugal movement of her thought made actual contact through some sixth sense. He reached hastily for a menu card.

"What'll it be? Maybe you'd prefer tea to the coffee I promised."

"Coffee, please."

"And cakes?"

"No, a sandwich." She considered the card, her dark lashes fine and straight. "An egg sandwich."

"You'll spoil your dinner."

She glanced up drolly. "Oh, no, I couldn't. It's almost six." When he had given the order, she leaned back against the booth, looking at him again. "I don't even know your name," she said, as if surprised.

"Spalding. Eric Spalding."

"There's a professor here named that. I heard him talk. You—you aren't related?"

"By marriage," said Eric, flippy. "His marriage. I'm a son."

She sat forward, the dark pupils of her eyes contracting into points set in cold amber of the irises. "You aren't a student, poor, working—"

"I'm poor, all right. A student, well, sort of."

"But you don't have to work! You aren't—"

"Worse than that, Sarah MacFee. I can't work. I am one of the wasted generation. Nothing for us to do. I've never worked a day in my life." His short upper lip drew back sardonically from even teeth, his voice was bitter. "Haven't you heard of us? Hundreds of us. Fine young men with no place on the earth." Was she such a mole she didn't know what went on above ground, outside the covers of a book? Staring at him as if he were an impostor, drawn clear back into a burrow, without a quiver of sympathy, of understanding.

"You must have found me most amusing, offering you advice." Why, she was furious! One hand fumbled at the buttons of her coat, the other groped for her cap. "When I think of all the thought I've wasted on you! I was so proud of you, struggling along, so tired you couldn't keep your eyes open! No coat, not even a hat. I thought you were getting thinner—Oh, what an idiot I've been!"

Eric moved quickly as she started to rise, thrusting one

long leg past the end of the table, foot planted on her bench. "You can't rush off this way! Sit down. I'm tired of seeing you day after day and not knowing a thing to fit with your face. You've wasted no more thought than I have. Why be angry? It's far worse to sit there with those damned books, and know that I'm scrapped before I've started. See, here's your egg." He watched her settle back, brooding and hostile, while the waiter slapped down mugs of coffee and sandwich. Narrow-minded little prig! Antagonism tingled in his finger-tips. "I suppose you meant that abominable sandwich wouldn't spoil your dinner because it's all you'll have!"

"It's enough, isn't it?" For a moment her eyes met his, and again Eric felt the quickening of excitement. Then she laughed, a delighted, hilarious laugh. "How ridiculous! Losing my temper because you aren't poor and shabby. I suppose it's the style to wear baggy clothes that don't match, and no hat. Take your foot away. I'll eat the sandwich."

She'd laugh at him, would she? "Listen! I'll tell you the sad story of my life—it won't take long—if you'll swap yours."

"I can guess yours now." She stirred cream into coffee. "Professor's son, sent to college, graduated, couldn't find suitable opening, all brokers' offices tight shut, went on living at home, pretending to study, feeling pretty sorry for himself."

"Good Lord, do you think I invented the depression? Suitable opening? I spent two years, two ghastly, futile years, in which I shrank into a bit of dust, trying to find a job. As architect. That's funny, isn't it?" Bitterness rolled over him, the dry, crumby bitterness of the past years. Why did he care what this girl thought? The feeling she roused was painful, the sting of a cramped nerve stirring out of numbness, the ache of blood trying to flow after deep unconsciousness. "I wanted to marry, too." He'd give her the whole picture. "That's ashes, now."

"Why didn't you get married? Couldn't she find a job, either?"

That was good, Wilma working! "My brother did marry. He and his wife and two brats are being supported by respective parents."

"Well, I'm helping my own brother out a little. But he's a farmer."

Eric clattered the thick coffee mug against the table. "You don't seem to understand what I'm telling you."

"I am afraid I do," said Sarah. "And I bet your mother sympathizes."

Eric jerked back his head. "What do you know about my mother?"

"Somebody must, or you wouldn't be sure I should. You said your girl—"

"At least Mother knows what's happened to me, to my friends."

"Well." Sarah's smile was tolerant. "My folks have always been poor. So it wasn't a shock to us. If I couldn't find one kind of work, I'd have to find another." She reached for her cap, and Eric's hand darted for her wrist.

"You haven't told me your story, you know. I'm not so clever as you at making one up." Under his fingers, under the smooth warm skin of her wrist, her pulse beat, even, strong. "Who are you, anyway?"

Nothing to tell, she insisted. Lots of women just like her. He had to pry it out. Finally he released her wrist. That small, sturdy body was inured to hardship. He could see her, that same cap pulled over her ears, that shining hair in a long braid, trudging along a country road, the horizon just brightening in clear, cold colors of winter sunrise. He looked at her hands, strong, supple, small; queer they bore no mark of toil. And this year she considered a miracle. That she had found a teaching position in a college town, where she could take a course or two on Saturday, could send part of her small salary home.

"Just like the heroine of an old-fashioned Sunday School story, aren't you? You aren't living in this country at all." His impulse to shatter her contentment, her assurance, was a sudden flame, light dancing on a sword. "You're an ostrich, with your head buried deep in the débris of a

ruined world, so deep you can't see what's all around you. You're living by abandoned notions. You half starve yourself in order to study, to do what you call getting ahead. One of these days a member of the school board will want your job for his niece, or there won't be any money to pay the teachers, and never, in all your life, have you had any of the things a girl ought to have, love and beauty and leisure and—" He stopped, for Sarah had pulled her cap over her head and was sliding out of the booth. She stood at the end of the table, her eyes reflective. He hadn't touched her, even to anger!

"Good-by, Jeremiah," she said. "You can't frighten me. I'd rather be an ostrich than have your headache. No—" as he wedged himself out—"no, it's no good. I don't want you to come."

"What do you mean, it's no good?" Eric's voice leaped at her. She lifted her eyes, and a confusion of feeling ached in him. She had fitted in the missing pieces of the jig-saw puzzle, and was done with it. She shook her head, and with a second "Good-by," went along the aisle to the door.

Eric stared after her, at the knob at the back of her head, the clumsy line of the brown coat. Then he sat down. She was more annoying than he had expected. He'd like to strangle her, his hands around that smooth, pale throat. For a moment there, at the beginning, he had felt—admit it!—that she needed to know him, that her self came close to his, that she might enter his loneliness. And what had he done? Tried to beat her down, to the level of his own defeat. It's no good. She knew. Well, what was she anyway? A little farm girl, a nobody. He'd done well to frighten her off. You can't frighten me, she had said. She had no imagination, no sensitiveness. He'd stay out of the library after four. He got up slowly, dropped change at the cashier's window, and went out to the street. A truck squawked at him, driving him back to the curb as it pounded past, green and red lights hinting at the limits of its bulk, broken chain clanking. Eric scowled. Looked like the truck that fellow Barney drove. Now look at him. (He spoke to Sarah MacFee.) Most brilliant man in his class. Dropped

everything his training, his position fitted him for. Where was he getting? Nowhere, except from one town to the next with his damned truck. I suppose you think that's fine, don't you?

Eric crunched along the snow-packed street which skirted the campus. At its best a night like this, he thought, when snow and evergreens and darkness made a unity of the heterogeneous buildings which by day gave a grotesque history of changing taste in architecture over three-quarters of a century. Like America, a hodge-podge, the Gothic towers of the library rising between the three-story brick box which had been the original College Hall, and the modernistic façade, all windows, of the Students' Union. And yet that girl spoke of the college as if it were the gate opening upon all enchantment.

He turned into a wide street beyond the campus, where the bare branches of tall elms and maples spread nets for the bright stars. Faculty Row. The President's house, the Dean's house, and farther up the hill, the Spalding house. Eric climbed slowly to the driveway, and looked at the white house, the door-lamp shining on the wide door, the hall light showing the delicate iron pattern of fan and sidelights. Somewhat Colonial, symbol of his mother's nostalgia for the East. Built with her money, in the days when his father was an instructor. Built perhaps to anchor his father. You didn't slip off to Europe to study art with a house like that and children and a wife who was the most charming hostess on the Faculty. No, you stayed put and became head of the Department of Art. You lectured on the history of painting and jibed at modern tendencies, but you didn't paint. You expected things of your sons. What do you think of that, Sarah MacFee? Must he go on arguing in his head with that girl? He wanted to explain things to her, to make her see. Tell her how the money he'd expected from his mother to start him off had vanished, with the rest of her income. (We've always been poor, so it wasn't a shock to us.) She wouldn't listen. He stamped snow from his feet and went in.

"Is that you, Eric?" His mother looked over the curving

mahogany rail at the head of the stairs. She was impressive in black lace, her equine face with its flat brow and long nose animated. "I'm so glad you've come. Wilma telephoned. Tickets for the symphony. I asked her for dinner. You've just time to dress. Are you tired?"

"No." Eric climbed the stairs. Even Sarah MacFee ought to appreciate this valiant old sport, her lace dress patched up, her gray head high, no matter what happened. "Must I dress? Just for a college concert?"

"Why, of course." She followed him to the door of his room, glanced in at the bright eye of the fire. "Did you have a good day?"

"Wonderful." His grimace said, You know it's a farce. "Read a book."

"That's fine. Wilma was complaining she never saw you, and I told her not many men would have the heart to plug away as you're doing."

(Old brick, trying to buck him up!) "Wilma sees enough of me, I assure you." He jerked open a drawer, hauled out a white shirt. The mirror showed his face, well modeled brow, long nose, short upper lip, chin jutting forward, not quite heavy enough to balance the forehead. "D'she say any more about her trip?"

"They're starting after Christmas." Mrs. Spalding sighed. "Hawaii will be nice next month. You mustn't mind if she's nervous—it's not easy—"

Eric swung around, his fingers screwing in a pearl stud. Then he shrugged. His mother wouldn't believe it was all up. She wanted Wilma for a daughter-in-law. She buttoned her mouth down cannily, and then said, "Well, I'll let you dress. Plenty of hot water."

All through dinner Eric found his mind urging him into further speculation about familiar things, as if he continued an argument. Paneled dining room, silver and crystal, deft maid. His father at an end of the table, his lean face immobile, a glint of humor in his deep eyes as he talked with Wilma. Wilma herself, in blue, her manner charming, her long fingers graceful. He'd thought he was mad about her when she first came back from boarding school. Delicate,

fair, smart. She was still fair, but her delicacy had sharpened, whetted on idleness, her smartness was shallow. She wanted a house, a husband. They had grown too indifferent even to quarrel, there had been no clear moment of recognizing an end. Wilma had said, "I like your mother and father. There's so little to do in this dull town, I can't give them up, too." Eric stared at her, trying to remember how he had once felt. His mother noticed the stare and moved brightly into conversation. A book she had been reading. Never talk about anything unpleasant. Roll gay marbles on a skim of ice beneath which moved dark water. Gertrude Stein was his mother's agate. Wilma thought it too bad the college had not tried to get her for a lecture. "Fitting symbol of the futility of the time," said Eric, "when nothing has meaning, not even words." Wilma's eyebrows signaled to Mrs. Spalding: See, he's sarcastic even about this! Mr. Spalding said, mildly, "I notice no lack of clarity about lecture fees." Wilma laughed, and Eric was silent. Presently his mother spoke of a tea she was giving the next week. Would Wilma help serve? And, with a sigh, "They aren't as pleasant as they used to be. The students have so little breeding. But it's good for them to see how things should be done."

"Papa thinks," said Wilma, "that all this terrible communism comes from the lower classes being educated and thinking they should have everything."

Eric had heard such talk before. Why, this time, did it start laughter behind his ears, not his laughter, but that girl's, Sarah MacFee's. "What do you mean, lower and upper?" He hadn't meant to shout so. Their round eyes focused on him, and he had to go on, wildly. "Upper is just who's on top, isn't it? If a world turns upside down, the top's the bottom. Look at Russia!"

"Eric, dear!" Mrs. Spalding pushed back her chair. "I don't wish to look at Russia. It's time for the concert." She swept past him, the short train of the dress flowing after her. Wilma followed, sending a brief reproachful glance over her smooth shoulder. Mr. Spalding cut the end of a cigar, the droop of his long eyelids sardonic.

"It's a state of mind," he said, snapping his lighter. "You can't argue with it." He grinned at Eric. "Now your mother is superior. But it's character, not class." He strolled toward the door. "Do you mind driving to-night? When it's icy, I lack both character and class."

Eric had a hand on the door-knob when his mother called. She came quickly down the stairs, steel buckles on her pumps flashing.

"I just wanted to say—" she tucked his scarf in at the collar—"that I won't have you growing morbid! There! I do like you in formal clothes. You carry them well." She gave him an admiring push. "We'll wait on the step."

Driving was at least something to do for a few moments, taking the icy curve of the hill expertly, circling the campus, coming up in a line of cars to the door of the auditorium. "We'll wait in the lobby while you park." His mother stepped nimbly down, lace train gathered in one white gloved hand. No use saying don't wait. She loved the impromptu reception she would hold.

Having found a space for the car, Eric walked back to the entrance, familiar dullness seeping through him. Same crowd, professors, officers, their wives, greeting each other as if meeting thus was an event; townspeople staring at the college people, who thereupon grew more animated. The college was the town's heart, wasn't it? Students, chittering, peering about for faculty to whom they might say a breathless how-do-you-do, or, the less impressed ones, rushing past with self-conscious absorption. Ah, his mother had annexed Prexy himself, and Mrs. Prexy, and Wilma was being very gay. Eric joined them, and Wilma sparkled even at him. Through the swinging doors came the muted cacophony of viols and violins being tuned. Suddenly a disturbance shattered his dullness. Wedging past, in a line bent toward the gallery stairs, was Sarah MacFee, in brown cap and coat, her dark brows almost meeting as her eyes came, after passing the rest of the glittering group, to Eric. Did it dazzle her, this array? Dazzle? She was smiling, a sly, derisive smile. Eric made an involuntary movement toward her, but she had gone in a spurt forward of the line,

and the stocky fellow in blue reefer had a hand on her elbow as they vanished through the gallery door. Honest worth, squandering fifty cents for culture. What did music sound like, if you came from a farm in Iowa and had never heard any? Would she lean forward in the gallery seat, hunting for him, brown eyes contemptuous? Eric trailed his party into the hall, stood at the end of the aisle, searching vainly the dim confusion of the gallery for a smooth brown head.

"Do sit down, Eric." Wilma rustled the program. "There's the conductor."

Eric sat down. All about him thuds and thumps of bodies being adjusted, crackle of programs. He knew how Wilma listened to music. First she read all the notes. Then she peered about at her neighbors, or watched the man with the traps. If he slid down in his seat, drawing his shoulder away from her slight movements, and closed his eyes—The waves of sound rose up to wall him into solitude. Why had she laughed? Because he wasn't ragged and starving? Didn't she know he had starved to death long ago? His pride, his confidence were bones picked clean. He was the desert where the bones were scattered, a waste land. A minor repeated phrase from the symphony, Dvorák's New World, pressed through the wall, voiced the feeling he denied. She couldn't stab him alive again. This painful, confused excitement wasn't proof of life. It was the jumping of a frog's leg after it is severed. He hoped he never saw her again. He would hate her, not sharply, but in dull monotony.

The car made an excuse for Eric to move out ahead of the others, through an audience making its own noise with gusto after the period of suppression. Clapping and stamping in the gallery. That lusty bulk with Sarah MacFee would enjoy that. Eric hesitated at the entrance to the stairs, but as the first feet sounded, he stalked out of the lobby. He drove Wilma home first, at her suggestion. "Then you won't have to take that bad hill but once." She didn't wish an intimate half hour any more than he did. Good-night, it's been so nice to see you, the concert was

delightful, call me up, Eric, a little bridge some evening. In the lighted doorway Wilma made a charming silhouette, waving them farewell before the butler swung shut the doors.

"If only you'd gone in for science!" Mrs. Spalding sighed, as Eric drove through stone pillars to the street. "Mr. Putnam could have given you something in his laboratories. He doesn't know there is a depression. People have to buy medicines, and all the fads in expensive gland pills—"

"It would have been clever of me. I'd rather be a parasite on the family trunk than on an outsider's, I think."

The silence which followed was the resilient silence his parents gave to such remarks. It was like the recoil spring at the bottom of an elevator shaft, and as always his words bounced from that silence against his own ears. Eric hunched his shoulders. What ailed him to-night?

He let them out, still silent, at the front door, and drove into the garage. As he flooded the motor before he turned the key he thought: that's an easy way, in this small place. Just let the door blow shut. The snow squeaked under his slow feet. Suicide was the solution some men had chosen. He wasn't tragic enough for that. The heavy curtains at living room windows let a pencil of light strike the snow, the light above the entrance made a pattern on the ice. As he entered the hall his mother appeared from the kitchen, and Eric went punctilioously toward her to take the tray with its beer and sandwiches. Following her into the living room, he thought that life in the house was like the pattern on the ice, a design of comfort, security, decorum, but for him only a shadow. He placed the tray on a table and drew a chair near for his mother. Year after year—he knew the precise gesture his father would use as he snapped off the bottle cap. "If you don't mind, I'll say good-night."

"Without even a sandwich?" (It was a minor treachery, not to sit there, chatting of nothing.)

"I have a slight headache."

"Ah!" That consoled her, explaining his eccentricity through the evening. "You mustn't drive yourself so! The aspirin is on the shelf in your bathroom."

He heard the restrained rhythm of their voices below him after he had flung himself into bed. Then sounds in the room obscured the murmur, the crash of wood and plaster as cold flowed through the open windows, the splutter of tiny flames as the lump of cannel coal broke and shifted. Suicide was not his solution. Religion. One man he knew had joined a brotherhood. He himself had chosen torpor, indifference. That was a kind of suicide, less annoying to the family. Living without reflection, without desire, being housed, fed, exchanging banalities which distressed no one. He had achieved torpor fairly well until, inexplicably, the image of that smooth, dark head began to interfere. He'd like to shatter that smug confidence of hers! Hell, why did he care what she thought? He pitched over, face in the crook of an arm.

In the morning his mother, solicitous, thought he might stay at home. "I must continue to go through the motions," said Eric.

"Don't talk like that!" Mrs. Spalding jerked up her head; bewildered fear showed at the corners of her eyes, in the line of her mouth. "A young man of your position and ability—" Her anger swept bewilderment and fear into a dark corner. "Why, it's ridiculous! It's just a question of time."

"If that's all—" Eric laughed—"I've plenty of time. It's what I've got most of." Hang on tight while the world rocked upside down: that was his mother's code. Presently it would rock back, and only the weaklings who had lost their grip would be scattered through space. He didn't believe it.

At five that afternoon Eric stood in front of the library. He had left it at three, to run no chance of meeting Sarah MacFee. He had set off for a walk. If he went fast enough and far enough, the movement of his muscles took the place of thought. And at five he cut across the campus. He had to see her.

The heavy doors swung open, a figure appeared, or several, girls pausing, their voices shrill-sweet, boys thrusting the doors wide, pounding down the steps and off. Open

and shut, in uneven rhythm. Each time the movement of the door pulled something taut in Eric; each time the figure, being not Sarah, let the tautness snap back. He was a child's ball on a string. Unless soon the emergent figure fitted his expectancy, he would splinter into bits.

Perhaps—this was later, when the pauses grew longer, most of the students having gone—perhaps Sarah had not come to-day. If she made up her mind she didn't wish to see him, you wouldn't find her at a door two hours later. She had said, it's no good. But if she had to avoid him, then he troubled her. Something had happened in those hours in the stacks, when without the idleness of words, the disguise of phrases, they had each grown so aware of the other. The line of brow, the way her wrist bent, the small wrist bone showing, the way she sat, her compact body arranged so neatly, and since yesterday, the cool life of her skin. Suddenly Eric attacked the door himself, hurried up the stairs to the section at the far end of the stacks. Her table was empty, not a book. The empty drawer gaped. She'd run away! He'd find her out. Tell the attendant at the desk he had a book of hers. He entered the main hall again just as Sarah MacFee laid a hand on the door. Her brown cap drooped, her push at the door lacked vigor.

"So there you are," said Eric. She did not start; she stood quite still a moment and then turned her head. "What have you done with your books?"

"I asked for another table." Her body gathered itself for departure.

"Why?" Eric was after her before the door swung back. His fingers shut about her elbow.

"I want one where I won't be disturbed."

"By me?"

"It is annoying to watch any one fall asleep. Your social life must wear you out!" She pried at his fingers. "Please! I am in a hurry."

Eric covered her hand with his, pressing it flat against the one which gripped her arm, until he felt pulses in his finger tips, in his palm. Sarah was silent, the top of her cap at his chin, and slowly her body altered from stiff

resistance into a tone not submissive, but eager, almost flowing. "Thank God I disturb you, too," he said. "You can't get me out of your head, can you?" He drew her down the steps. "Let's go around here." Here was a dark court between buildings, with a silent fountain, the bronze figure snow-capped and paunched, snow piled on the rim of the stone basin. Eric brushed clear a space. "Sit here." She was a quiet shadow beside him, her face a pale oval in the faint snow-light.

"I will get you out of my head," she said, "now that I know you."

"What do you know? Because I'm not starving in an attic, you pull your face into a sneer, you won't speak to me. What business have you got being so damned superior about things you don't begin to understand?"

"I'm not superior!" Her voice deepened in anger. "I'm wretched! I hate you for looking one way and being another. I've been a fool—"

"Because you thought you liked me? Because, hiding behind your books, you watched me, and something grew in the silence between us which now you mean to destroy." Eric's palm slipped on the cold stone, and the pain of the abrasion was his mood. "It was truer than this silly attitude of yours!"

"It's not silly. It's sane. There can be nothing between us. Oh, I'd imagined enough, I'm not afraid to admit that. But I am afraid of what you are. You—you're what's the matter with the world now, empty and futile and unreal." Her silhouette was straight and sturdy against the snow. "We have not one thing in common."

"No?" Eric laid an arm about her shoulders, finger tips coming to rest in the warm hollow of her throat. His thumb lifted her chin and he kissed her. Her mouth, frost-cold, grew warm under his. She turned a little into his embrace. Then she was crying, tears salt on his lips.

"It's no good. I don't want to love you!" She slid away from him.

"No more do I." Eric could see only a hint of white for her face.

"It's not too late to stop. It isn't you I want. It's the you I made up."

"No one could want me." (Let her go, don't touch her, loving her meant coming alive to suffer.) "Go away before it is too late. You'll save us both trouble. For if I kiss you again I shall be quite mad and think that because you are small and quiet and brown I can never let you go." His voice was harsh. "And that would be intolerable. I have no life. I just exist day by day. You would find yourself entangled with a useless shadow."

"Have you no courage? What are you afraid of, that you hide behind empty, bitter phrases?"

Eric moved slowly to his feet, heavy with compressed calmness, the dead center of his opposed emotions. "Of course I'm afraid, you little fool. You would be, too, if you had a grain of sense." He drew her up on tiptoe and kissed her. The staunch vitality of her body flowed into him like fragrance. In some curious way detached from touch, from sense, the secret essence of her personality moved in a green cool wave over Eric. He did not think how she looked nor how he felt, holding her. He had, in a swift, drenching moment, a complete recognition of her, and he knew that this was love itself, no half-penny passion, no tepid compromise. Why that essence of her should be a song, a wave, a lucid peace, food after a long hunger, why it should be all of these and yet something as familiar as the beating of his heart, he did not understand.

Presently she clasped her hands behind his head and swung away from him a little. "Now it is too late." Her laughter was warm and rich with discovery.

"Yes," said Eric. "But what is there for us to do? I want you the rest of my life, and tell you, and you must listen, that I have no life."

Sarah turned her head, laid her cheek against his breast. "You don't feel dead. I can hear your heart." Then she unclasped her hands. "Let's walk along together," she said. "I have to get used to it." They walked in silence, her hand in his. Under a street light she looked up at him, fatigue dark on her eyelids, deep in the hollows of her

cheeks. "Isn't it queer—" as she smiled, the fatigue was gone—"that when there are so many people, just one can be this way for another. Wouldn't it be dreadful if you never met! Not how you look, or talk, or move. I can't separate them. I just ring like a great bell, thinking *you*." Her hand tightened. "Oh, Eric! The rest of our lives."

"And how—" Eric let her hand go in a spasmodic gesture—"can we do that? People don't marry now. Men can't work. Am I to take you home, where I live dependent on charity of the family? Would you like that? My mother—" He stopped, consternation like a tug at handcuffs he had forgotten.

"Of course you can't take me home." Sarah's voice was quiet. "I'm not a package of laundry." They had turned down a side street, with small and shabby lodging houses. "Your mother won't like me, I expect. I might be afraid of her, if you didn't love me." She glanced at one of the houses, where light showed through limp net curtains, and the weather-beaten porch sagged to the steps. "I live here. Third floor rear. I can't ask you up. It wouldn't be respectable. And the other roomers sit around in the living room." With a sudden movement she faced Eric, her hands gripping the woolen stuff of his coat. "Don't you see? We've got to make a place. Oh, if you were only the poor, struggling fellow I thought! Then we'd roll together what we have, no matter how little—"

A thin, elderly man paused, gave a surprised cackle, "Good evening, Miss MacFee!" and climbed the steps. Sarah waited until he had closed the door.

"Kiss me," she said. "He's peeking out, but kiss me!" And then, "We'll be practical to-morrow. To-night—" She clung a moment and then went slowly into the house, lingering a moment in the door as if she must come swiftly back to him. Eric saw her head lift as she moved out of sight.

He walked past the house, thinking he might see a light flash on in her third floor rear. But the adjoining houses crowded too closely, so like it that Eric wondered if he could be sure which one Sarah had entered. He stared at

the shabby row, thinking: if I were that fellow at the railroad lunch counter, we'd get married, we'd live in a crowded, dingy room, Sarah would go on teaching, I'd toil along, believing that presently, by magic, I could make a good life for us. All the men and women who live in houses like these until they die must have started with delusions. He dug his fists into pockets and strode away. The difference was that he knew ahead of time what happened. And yet—his shoulders relaxed, his head went up, as the wave of Sarah flooded him; it filled him, and there was no room for anger or resentment, no room for anything except his need of her. He knew, with amazement, how the dingiest room might be a shell for beauty.

His father and mother were already dining when he entered the house. His mother's voice had the caustic tincture brewed by anxiety. "I don't see what should have detained you so long."

"I'm sorry." Eric sat down. "I didn't realize it was so late." His mother inspected him; Eric thought, she can't guess, I look the same.

"I dislike imagining that something may have happened to you. It isn't as if you had work you had to finish, or—"

"I know." Eric unfolded his napkin, noting with surprise that his fingers trembled. "Having nothing to do, I could at least be punctual, like a good little boy." His tone kept the words a dry jest. "What a farce it is, this pretense that I do anything."

His mother's eyes opened wide, as if she shied away from something startling in her path. "Don't put words in my mouth." She smiled, tolerant of him, of herself. "I dislike that as much as unpunctuality."

It is a farce, thought Eric, as the maid set a plate before him. That's why Sarah smiled that way. I've gone on being the Spaldings' little boy.

"We're playing bridge with the Millers to-night. Would you care to come?"

"No, thank you." Bridge, when Eric knew, with finality cold as metal, that he had to find the act which would end this farce. Bridge every Thursday with the Dean and

his wife. Mrs. Spalding began a detailed reminiscence of last Thursday, with occasional notes from Mr. Spalding. Eric did not listen. Twice, looking up, he found his mother's eyes intent upon him. Did he give some sign, a flick of eyelid, a breath, startling in one dead so long? But she said nothing, except for a final, "Why don't you run over to Wilma's?" She did not wait for an answer, her mind running ahead into the evening. Eric watched the two of them down the walk, his father swinging a walking stick, his mother trotting briskly at his side. They hold their end up well, he thought. What they'll say—

In the doorway of his own room he looked about as if he saw it for the first time and thought not to see it again, the fire, the leather chair, brown and red of rugs and hangings. One must keep up certain standards of living, his mother would say, emphatically. He crossed to the desk, filled a pipe and sat down. For a time he fidgeted with a pencil, drawing idle rows of interlaced triangles and circles. Then on fresh paper he began a list in slanting draughtsman print. He got up once and bolted down the stairs, returning with the small telephone directory of the town. When the grandfather's clock on the stairs struck eleven, its slow vibration of metal bell muffled within the old wood of the case, he undressed hastily. Half an hour later, in their unvaried pattern, his father and mother had come in. As he had expected, his mother stopped outside his door. He could see her there, head thrust forward, trying to penetrate door, darkness, even sleep. He held his breath until he heard her feet along the hall. For he knew, in wordless, bitter instinct, that he had as yet no firm ground for his feet, that he might topple at a dexterous thrust.

The next morning Eric went first to the college appointments bureau. He had been there often the first year or so after graduation, filling out endless questionnaires. "I'll take anything you can get me," he said.

Porter shrugged wearily. "Fill out this blank."

"That's no good. I want a job."

"No vacancies in teaching this time of year."

"Digging a ditch, then."

"Hang it all, Spalding, odd jobs like that I have to split up among the fellows here who need them. Working their way through. You've got a home."

"What's there for them when they get their way worked through?"

"You're telling me," said Porter, glumly. "You think I enjoy it?"

That was that. Eric stood outside the administration building and looked at his list. He had started with Porter because it was easiest.

At five that evening he waited again for Sarah, and as he saw her coming with a lovely, seeking swiftness, the weight of the day fell away from him. The dark court with the fountain was their haven. When they had kissed, Eric traced with finger tips the shape of her brow, the curve of her mouth. "I have a plan," he said. "But I can't tell you yet." And Sarah, "I lay awake, hours. But I couldn't plan, I couldn't move out of now, this moment. Always before I've lived ahead of time, putting up with what I had because of what I meant to have and be. Now—" she laughed, bending her head back into the palm of his hand, "I'd like now to be forever."

"But this isn't enough, a few minutes at the end of a day. I want more!"

"So do I. But that is now turning into forever."

Later, when Eric bade her good-night, standing at the foot of the rickety steps, he asked, "To-morrow? Saturday? When can I meet you?" Sarah was going away, to the city, until Monday! Jealousy set loose stinging hornets in his mind, jealousy of all the days of her life so separate from his. "You'd rather go! Two whole days! With whom?"

"I promised weeks ago." Her voice had quick anger. "Before this—" Then, yielding her anger, "It's an old friend from Iowa. I promised her."

"Send her word. I must see you to-morrow."

"I can't, Eric."

She wouldn't. Eric stared at her, and suddenly he kissed her, a quick realization blowing away the buzzing jealousy.

She would always be stubborn, but that stubbornness would be as much for him as against him, a part of her strength out of which he forged a new weapon.

By Monday Eric had thrown away his neat notes; he had thrown away, too, most of his ideas that he might be conspicuous, that he might hear, "But a man like you doesn't want this job." He had discovered how many kinds of work the town lived on, at which he wasn't needed. He knew the furtive, hating look in the eyes of other men who waited in line until one of the few factories or small manufacturing plants opened, and a gate-man hung out a worn sign, No Help Needed. He tried the stores, offering himself as stock man, as floor walker. He climbed dingy stairs to printing shops, to lofts with noisy looms. He stood on street corners, watching men, tellers dim in their cages behind bank windows, grimed drivers of coal trucks, street cleaners in smudged white uniforms, men with eyes that knew their destination. If they could find work—

Friday evening Eric and Sarah walked up Faculty Row, their pace slow as if they climbed more than a hill. "That's the house," said Eric.

"Where you've lived all your life. I didn't know it was so grand." Sarah stopped. It glowed, soft lights in many windows, it spread substantial and secure among the tall, vaguely discerned trees. "Are you sure—" she warned him fiercely, "that you can give all this up? It's just an attic, the rooms I found. I thought we were in luck, it was so cheap. But look at this!"

"Don't be an idiot." Eric stalked on. His heart had dropped into his stomach, to pound in nervous haste. "It's too late for such talk."

"It's not! You can have a marriage annulled. You don't have to—" She ran to catch up with him.

"Shut up!" Eric seized her arm and kissed her, a hard, angry kiss.

The wide front door opened and chatter burst out, a whole flock of gay, light voices released into the night. Figures appeared, lingering on the steps, calling farewells, groups of young, quick-moving girls.

"It's a party! Eric!" Sarah tried to pull out of his grasp.

"Lord, I'd forgotten." Eric's feet were heavy, urging flight. No! "Don't have a panic. It's nothing but one of Mother's teas. It must be over." He marched Sarah past the departing guests straight to the door. "Now!"

His mother stood in the living room, elegant in purple velvet, listening benignly to the murmurs, "Such a nice time, so sweet of you to ask us," from a few girls, who, being the tag-end, found difficulty in escaping with grace. In the dining room across the hall, behind the silver tea service, the crystal bowl of roses, sat Wilma, tapping a finger over a slight yawn.

"Eric!" Mrs. Spalding advanced. "At last! So many asked for you." She extended a hand to Sarah. "And you've just come? You must have your tea at once, then. Good-night, my dears." This to the girls, who with tinkles of laughter filed out of the door.

Eric had geared himself so high for the encounter that not until his mother had shooed Sarah toward the dining room did he understand. Sarah's eyes, black in the pallor of her face, begged him for rescue. His mother had taken her for a belated guest!

"Mother, this is Sarah MacFee." Eric stood in the doorway. "My mother, Sarah. And Miss Putnam." Wilma leaned forward, fingers looping the pearls at her neck, her mouth tightening. Sarah stood quietly between the two women, only the little feather in the brown hat quivering. She waited for him.

"Oh, you came with Eric?" Mrs. Spalding hemmed. "Do have tea."

"We had tea," said Eric. They had. After they had come from the Justice of the Peace. In the booth where they had first talked.

"Well, then—" Mrs. Spalding looked at Sarah, and Eric saw, suddenly, that Sarah's oxfords were muddy. "Shall we go in by the fire?"

"I must run along." Wilma stood up, slender in black, fingers restless in the string of pearls. "Good-night, Miss—

ah—"Night, Eric." Her glance, questioning, derisive, slid quickly away.

"Pardon me a moment." Mrs. Spalding followed her out of the room.

Sarah said, just above a whisper, "I wish I hadn't come. I *am* scared. You should have told her, first."

"Can't you see?" Eric swept his hands wide. "Words would be no good. Endless argument. Perhaps I am a coward. But at least words can't touch us, now." In the hall he heard words, quick, low, Wilma and his mother.

"She—" Sarah heard them, too. "She is the girl you told me about?"

Eric nodded.

"I'm glad—" Sarah smiled, and the tenseness of her face vanished—"that she didn't get you."

"She'll be still gladder, when she hears what I am doing."

The outer door closed, and Mrs. Spalding appeared at the doorway. Eric thrust a fist into a pocket. *Now.* "Mother." He stepped toward her. "I have something to tell you. I tried to think of a kind way, an easy way, and couldn't find one. This is—that is—we're married. Sarah is my wife."

Mrs. Spalding stood motionless; the purple of her gown seemed reflected in her throat, in her face. "Impossible!" Her voice crackled. "Why, Wilma just asked, 'Who is this person?' and I said, 'I never heard of her.'" She waited for her rejection to effect a vanishing act.

"Sarah wanted to tell you first." Eric gripped Sarah's cold fingers. "But I couldn't hope to persuade you. Now it's done. We were married to-day."

"You bring a strange woman into my house and expect me—" She swept a hand through the air, brushing at nightmare. "Did you have to marry her?"

"Not as you mean it." The touch of Sarah's hand held him from sliding down the years into appalled childhood. "Listen, Mother. I've—"

Mrs. Spalding's face stiffened as the maid peered in, round-eyed. "It's all right, Ella. You may clear away. We'll go into the living room."

She preceded them, seating herself on a straight chair. "Close that door, Eric. She has overheard too much as it is." Sarah sat in a corner of the divan and Eric stood behind her. "It must be a trick. No self-respecting woman would marry a man who is utterly dependent."

"That's the rest of it." Pity dried Eric's throat. "I've got a job. Not much. Enough with what Sarah makes for us to live." He stumbled over words, trying to alter his mother's painful disbelief. He told of the jobs he had asked for and hadn't got. He had gone last to Barney. He hadn't wanted to cadge on an old acquaintance, but at the end that didn't matter.

"And who is Barney?" The words crept between rigid lips.

"Barney's Trucking Service, Chicago, Detroit, Grand Rapids. He didn't need a man. Yesterday one of his drivers got drunk. He looked me up. Twenty-two bucks to start, more if I pick up new trade."

"My son a truckman! After all we have done—"

"Your son at work. If I got this job, I can get others."

"Because of a sudden infatuation, you ruin your life. If you care for him—" she swooped at Sarah—"you won't allow it! You'll refuse!"

The front door opened, and Mr. Spalding strolled in. "Anthony!" cried Mrs. Spalding. "Eric is mad! He's married! He's a truck driver." Mr. Spalding looked from his wife to Eric, to Sarah. Then he smiled, and patting his wife's shoulder, stooped a little to take Sarah's hand. Gratitude exploded dizzily in Eric's head.

"So," his father said, "you've taken him on. High time, too. Truck driving. Healthful occupation. Can you support a wife on a truck?"

"No," said Eric. "Sarah supports herself." He thought: Father really sees her! "We've taken rooms on Dunbar Street, in one of those old houses."

"You might have told us more gradually." Mr. Spalding stood beside his wife. "It's rather violent, this suddenness."

"Anthony!" Mrs. Spalding clung to his hand for rescue.

"It's criminal! Are you crazy, too? Your son—why, he's not a laborer!"

"He never has been. He had to fall in love."

"Hopeless! Destructive! You're as romantic as they are!"

"You have to be romantic nowadays to stay alive. That's all that's left. It's useless to be practical or thrifty or realistic."

Then Sarah spoke for the first time, her voice quick and warm. "That's it! We don't know what's happening, what may happen. Why wait? I thought, this afternoon, it's a new kind of pioneering. My grandparents started for the West when they married. They weren't afraid. We aren't." She moved her head to look at Eric, the line of her throat swelling like a song. "A kind of pioneering, not in wild land now, but still in making a life together."

"I don't like it! I don't like it at all!" said Mrs. Spalding.

"We'll be going," said Eric. He linked his arm in Sarah's. "We have to move all Sarah's things." His father nodded. "When you want to see me—"

"Give us a little time to get used to the idea."

In the hall Eric turned back a moment. His father had perched on the arm of the chair, long legs out-stretched, the gray crest of the mother's head erect above his shoulder. Eric closed the door softly, quickly. For an instant he stood in darkness, of the night, of change, of separation. "Well, pioneer!" He had Sarah's hand, turning in his like a question. Of course! Together they started swiftly toward the town.



MAINSTAY

ALONG the cindery track the porter ranged strapped bags, expensive but much-traveled; the convex portfolio he handled tenderly, flashing a well-tipped grin at Rodney Graham. "Yassuh, okey, suh."

Well, here "we are. Rodney descended slowly, irritation in the furrow between his eyes. He had seen the smoke-dulled red brick station, the time-dulled iron gates often enough, but the knowledge that this time he would not, after a fortnight or so, walk through that gate to board an east-bound train, such knowledge increased the dinginess, deepened his irritation. The porter clattered his steps onto the car platform and swung aboard. The train pulled out, the cleft air brushing Rodney's face derisively: you stay, I go. Rodney flung up an imperative hand toward a stooped, grizzled red-cap dawdling at the gate.

There was Alison behind the gate, the small anxiety of waiting clearing from her blue eyes as she saw him. He hadn't written her of the change. And there was Stella on tiptoe, slim body pressed to the bars, young face luminous with expectancy. His quick feet gritted on cinders.

"Hello, little Star!" He liked her thin arms tight about his neck.

"You're blocking the way, dear." Alison drew the two of them aside. "Well, Rodney!" He bent to kiss her, frowning. What if they did block the way a moment! "The car's just

outside." Alison directed the porter. "Greg's in it, so I could leave it at the door."

"He wanted to come to the gate." Stella's whisper shared an old joke with her father. "But it wasn't practical." She clung to his arm, laughter moving like light over her face, and they followed the neat, brisk figure of Alison through the waiting room. Rodney patted the fingers linked around his arm. You couldn't detain Alison for a moment of sentiment, of celebration.

Gregory lounged against a fender of the car, thin, froggy. "How are you, Father?" he began, his manner an experiment in maturity. Rodney swept him into the crook of his free arm, and the three of them stood laughing while Alison directed the stowing away of bags. A taxi drew up, honking.

"Do get in!" Alison slid under the wheel. "We're—"

"Blocking the way!" chanted Stella and Greg, gravely.

The color deepened in Alison's cheeks, but her toe was firm on the starter. Rodney wedged his long legs between bags in the rear, Stella leaned against his shoulder, and Greg flopped beside his mother. It was one thing, thought Rodney, when I knew I was going back to New York. But now— He considered Alison's small head, poised alertly above rounded, firm shoulders. Stella at least would never grow into that sort of woman. She was all charm and dependence, as impractical as a baby.

"What are you thinking about?" Her heavy-lashed eyes admired him. "You'll make a wrinkle between your eyebrows if you scowl like that!"

"A wrinkle in my unlined face?" He scoffed, and shut away the image of Lilian which flickered on the wall of his mind. He had left her in New York, he had broken with her—not that there had been anything to break except delicate cobwebs of beginning. This exasperation he felt might be partly guilt. Alison had done little to provoke it. Still, a crumb was bread or cake!

Rodney took off his hat and ran fingers through dark hair which stood up in a crisp mane over his square face and had to be smoothed over a weak spot at the crown of his head. His fingers smoothed it now, and he said, "I have a piece of

news." He felt Alison's attention in slackened speed. "Can you put up with me at home all the time from now on?" Stella seized his hand with an ecstatic, "Father!"

"The New York office is closed. I'm to have headquarters here."

Alison drove on evenly again. "Do you mind, Rodney?" She did not turn.

"It's failure. Not mine. The time's. Mind? After I'd built up the eastern business? To go back to a trip once a year, as I did ten years ago."

"But you can stay with us! You always said you wanted to, you would if you could." Stella shook his fingers. "Aren't you glad?"

"Will we be poor?" Greg turned a solemn face.

"Of course I haven't wanted to be separated from you."

"Will we?" insisted Greg.

"Will we what? Oh, poor. Not very."

Alison swung the car onto a long boulevard, recently widened, October leaves a warm russet on the white curb. A few more blocks, a side street, and then their own driveway, up to the brick and raftered house sedate among small grouped evergreens. "I'll leave the car here," she said. "I haven't done the marketing yet. Your train was so early."

"But I have to go to the office." Rodney saw himself stranded, careless. Alison had said not a word about his news!

"I'll drive you down. Greg, don't try to carry everything!"

"I couldn't move till they were off my feet." Rodney seized a suit-case.

"Is that all your luggage, Rodney? If you're home to stay—I didn't realize, at the station." Alison's brows worried.

"Oh, Lord, I forgot." Rodney slapped at his pockets. "Checks somewhere. It's been so long since I had to bother with trunks." He handed the checks to Alison. "Just drop them at the baggage room, will you?"

He stood a moment in the hallway, glancing through arched doors into the long living room, the dining room. "Ah, it's good to be home again. It's lucky we hadn't sold the house and all moved east, isn't it?" The length of his stay

in New York had increased so gradually that never had there been an acute argument about the location of the family. Alison had said, once, "You're nothing but an occasional guest," and he, "I get back when I can!" Well, he had been proved right, this time.

"Would you like coffee, Rodney?"

Alison wouldn't admit he was right! "I had breakfast," he said, stiffly. "But hours ago. If it's no trouble—" He strolled into the living room, quick eye noting new books on the table, sheets of new music on the piano, fragments of this life in which he had so small a part. Stella curled beside him on the divan, as if her slim body had no bones, dark curls tousled from her cap, eyes brilliant. "It's just too marvelous!" she sighed. "Your staying here! I can scarcely bear it."

Rodney laughed. Lovely, the way the child gave herself up to feeling.

"Stella!" called Alison. "Will you take this tray, please?"

Stella tweaked at her father's mane and unwound her legs. She was back in a moment with the tray, mouth buttoned in absorption as she placed it on the small table. Sugar, cream, marmalade on the toast; then she sat on the hearth, arms about her knees.

"Haven't we any minions now?"

"Oh, very!" Stella giggled. "But she's way past breakfast now."

"What's your mother doing?" Not that he expected Alison to sit on the hearth, adoring him. But she might come in—

"She's telling the laundry-man he won't go to heaven unless he finds a towel he lost, a beautiful, hem-stitched, infallible linen towel."

Rodney clicked the cup into its saucer. "You might tell her I have to get to the office. How about a walk this afternoon? Or are you busy?"

"Me?" Stella made a droll face. "Never. Mother—" she tipped her head back to look up at Alison. "May I drive down with you?"

"You haven't practiced yet, Stella." Alison pulled on her gloves.

"But I'd like to celebrate to-day," coaxed Stella.

Alison's glance disposed of that idea as childish. Rodney lifted an eyebrow at Stella, and followed Alison without saying, as he wished, "Oh, let her come along!"

Alison had to coax the motor before it caught, white teeth pressed into full lower lip, flush deepening in the faint hollow under the cheekbone. "I told the mechanic to look at the points," she said. "Unless you stand right over people—"

A smile contracted Rodney's eyes. One of Stella's quotations.

"I suppose," he said, "I'd better begin to drive again."

"You know you hate it." Alison cut neatly onto the boulevard. "The car's cranky. I thought it would do for the winter. But it has whims."

"We'll get a new one, then; one some one beside you can manage." But he did hate driving. A car had no response to facets of personality. It was like Alison to enjoy manipulating even inanimate stubbornness. "Do you know," he said, slowly, "you haven't said you're pleased at my news, or aren't you?"

"I was startled, Rodney." She turned her head a moment, the blue eyes under high arched lids candid, almost troubled that she must be honest. "I've spent years getting used to your being away. I am not sure—"

"Not sure what? It didn't take the children long to know they were glad. You might pretend a little." His smile was charming, cajoling.

"I can't pretend. You know I can't." Her teeth caught at her lip. "I *am* glad. But I'm frightened, too. There!" She straightened her shoulders, relieved at having said it. "We aren't children. You may not like it. But we can't talk now. Here's the office." She steered deftly into the curb.

Wide plate glass windows, with GRAHAM-COLLINS HARDWARE COMPANY in gold letters, and a large poster with a blue eagle underneath. His face hardened, lines deepening past the nostrils. "That's what's done it, closed my eastern office, pared down our profits. Adjusting to a code."

"That's what I mean," said Alison. "Adjusting. You don't like it, ever."

Rodney caught a glimpse of the bald head of Collins, senior partner, a dim moon well back from the windows. When you came back, Collins had written, one of us can stay at the factory, one at the town office. And Alison jabbed at him about adjustment! "Compared to you, Alison, my dear—" he stepped down from the car—"I'm as flexible as a rubber band. But we won't argue." Then, as he strode around the nose of the car he stopped, eyebrows jumping. "Alison, is my portfolio there? By all—" He peered angrily into the rear of the car. "I've got to have it. All my notes—"

Alison's smile flickered. "I'll drive back. It won't take long."

She reached for the door he had left swinging and slammed it. As she shifted into gear she watched the pantomime of Rodney's entrance. He stood erect and hearty just inside the office, the heads of clerks and secretaries bobbed to attention like startled fish in a lighted aquarium. Collins came swimming forward, Rodney walked slowly, masterfully out of the foreground, out of sight. "Dear God," whispered Alison, as she tugged at the wheel to cut out of the small space, "dear God, what am I going to do?"

For a fortnight Rodney was engrossed in affairs of the firm. Collins was flatly discouraged. "It's all a headache, I tell you." Collins wiped his forehead, his short upper lip. "Our best men have to lay off two days because they've used up their hours. We have to pay our poor men so much we can't pay the good ones what they earn. It's a headache, that's all."

"We'll work out a new schedule, three shifts." Rodney's face set in harsh furrows. "Shave wages at the top. They'd all rather have something than nothing, nowadays. We've got to get fresh stock. If I can't stay east to handle distribution, the stuff's got to be good enough to sell itself."

Good thing he'd come back. Collins was in a rut; he'd been eating depression so long he'd dulled his taste for other food. Rodney spent hours in the factory; he worked out graphs from order lists; in the evenings a draftsman, a young

college boy, sat with Rodney in his study, making drawings from Rodney's rough sketches of new models, locks, casement fixtures, knobs. "Metal's a good thing to dream with," Rodney would say. "It never lets you down." The boy, breathing heavily with admiration, would press thumb-tacks in a fresh sheet of drawing paper. They worked so late that the household would be asleep when Rodney closed the front door upon the boy.

Alison had breakfast with Stella and Gregory, and then drove them off to high school for the early session. Rodney heard her voice, drowsy—distant. "Stella! Greg! Aren't you up yet? You *will* be late!" Ridiculous to get children up so early. The city ought to build a new school large enough for all the kids at once. Borrow some of the alphabetized funds. Why not? Employment, good hardware contract. Now who could put that over with the Council, get the Governor's ear? Then he slept again until Alison drove into the yard and raced the motor under his window. Usually she pattered about the house like an energetic wren until time to drive him to the office.

Stella mourned that he might as well have stayed east for all she saw him. He ruffled her hair and said, "Wait a week or so, then I'll be out of the woods." At the end of the first week Alison said, "If you could just let me know what time you wish dinner. Mollie fusses so when you're late. She doesn't want the dinner spoiled."

"My dear Alison!" He tried to be patient. "I come as soon as I can. Which is more important, my work or your servant's whims?"

"It's her work," began Alison, and stopped as Mollie clumped in.

The very next night he reached home at five, wishing dinner early because he had a meeting that evening, an important one about the housing investigation.

"But, Rodney!" Alison raised her voice, as if he were deaf. "It's roast lamb. I can't hurry it. Nobody can hurry it."

"Then give me a slice of bread. I can't wait." Stella hovered at his shoulder, properly distressed, while he starved on scrambled eggs and ham. "Will you 'phone for a taxi for me,

little Star?" Rodney spoke in an undertone. "I don't want to take your mother away—" he smiled—"from roast lamb."

But the taxi did not come. Rodney appeared at the dining-room door, as Alison served belated lamb. "Where is that damned cab?"

Alison rose quickly. "Don't wait for me, children." She hurried for coat and gloves. "Did you give the right address, Stella?"

"Why, yes, Mother." Stella thought. "Forty-nine Park—" she clapped a hand over her mouth, her eyes pools of chagrin. "I forgot they'd changed the name! I always say the old name!"

"Never mind. It isn't late." Alison trotted ahead of Rodney to the car.

"A natural slip," said Rodney, climbing in.

"Very, for Stella. It wasn't necessary to send for a cab."

Rodney made a brilliant little speech that evening, impromptu, not precisely on the subject of housing. He pointed out that what the country needed was the principle of life, the ability to change, to form new habits. The lack of flexibility, he finished, was a feminine quality. America must be more masculine. Women, concerned with petty things, made a rigid microcosm, meals at certain hours, laundry on certain days, he needn't amplify for this audience. In the home, in the city, in the country, men must stand erect for life to express itself in variety, in growth. He rather wished Alison could have heard him. He was asked to speak again, in the same spirit, at the Business Men's Luncheon Club several days later. America had been too dominated by a small feminine practicality. A country was great only when it was male, adventurous, free. Look at pioneer days! Look at the Elizabethan Age! That stopped him a moment, while he disposed of the Queen as an authentic masculine spirit. Look at their schools, at their town council. The men looked, and Rodney finished to a big hand offered by free males.

He strode back to his office, enjoying the movement of his lean, long legs, his arms swinging from braced shoulders. Nothing flabby, nothing middle-aged about him. The secre-

tary was arranging letters in a basket on his desk, a creamy envelope on top, unopened. "It's marked personal," she said, "and I didn't know—" Her mouth had the brilliant finish of after-luncheon renewal.

"That's right." Rodney was casual. He sat down to sign the letters she had typed, and waited until she had carried them away before he picked up the conspicuous square. Lilian, of course. He hadn't written.

"Razzles dear—You've forgotten who I am with your important head full of important things. Reading from left to right, third from the end, little girl with red hair. Right! Anyway I want to see you again because I am sure nobody could be as handsome as I remember you—nor as good fun. The point is, I'm going to Chicago. I got that contract with the soap people for a fifteen-minute program. I'm scared to death to go, not knowing a soul there. I looked up your town and it's only half an inch from Detroit and I thought if you happened to be there Friday morning I'd stop for a few hours—Detroit, I mean—and then take another train. Could you go a half inch to show me it's some other man I'm thinking about? If you're too busy or anything I'll understand."

Funny little red-head. Rodney could hear that husky voice of hers. No wonder she pulled down contracts. Its warm, sensuous vibrancy, its over-notes of emotion seemed intensified by a microphone. He tore the letter into feathers, smiling. She had something. Maybe she set up ether vibrations without broadcasting. Friday. He jerked his calendar pad across the desk. Dinner at the Holcombes' that night. Important, too. If he got the town's banker to take up his scheme for a new school— Still, the New York train got in at eight in the morning. Half an inch from here. It could do no harm. Never, in all these years, even with Alison so-well, *so!*—had he been unfaithful. And that, in these days of willing women, meant something. But he couldn't make an eight o'clock train, not without leaving in the middle of the

night. "Meet you lobby Hotel Majestic at ten Friday," he wired. L. Silverthorne, the address read, noncommittally.

When, Thursday evening, he spoke of the trip, Alison said, "I'll drive you down, if you like. I have shopping for the children I ought to do."

"I'd planned to use the hour on the train going over some data," began Rodney, awkwardly. "I shouldn't think you'd want to drag around the city when you've got a dinner on." He didn't know how long Lilian would stay—

"I just thought you might prefer it." Alison shrugged. "You will get back in time? The Holcombes are giving the dinner for you."

"Good Lord, of course I will."

He had not anticipated the quality of excitement which whirred in his blood as he crossed the lobby, as he saw Lilian. She sat in a high, carved chair with palms behind her. Her coppery hair glowed under a petal of green hat, the soft folds of mink repeated the color, she swung one bronze slipper. In profile her face looked older, harder, with the pallor of her skin and the line of aquiline nose. As she turned at his approach, Rodney drew a sudden breath. Her eyes always surprised him. Set wide apart, with lashes just darker than the darkest tone of her hair, and blue, a light blue flecked with amber. Small wonder she had a trick of staring imperatively, of watching for recognition of their beauty.

"Razzles, darling! I thought you'd never come!" She had both his hands, mocking him because he didn't kiss her crimson mouth. The corsage of tiny bulbous orchids, amber and brown, trembled over her breast.

"How grand you look!" He smiled at her. "Orchidaceous yourself."

"That's it." She stepped back, crimson fingertips interlacing. "It's that smile of yours. Oh, Razzles, have you missed me?"

"Let's find a place where we can talk." He walked with her past the palms, past the desks, to a divan in a corner. Had he been a fool to come? Their meeting here, at a point in space removed from their usual lives, had altered the feeling between them, as if the momentum of their movement across

the earth toward each other gave their impact a stinging violence. He had not meant to feel anything but calm and friendly, with a paternal emphasis. Lilian leaned back, drawing long suède gloves through her hands. Did he like her coat? Advance money on the new program. She knew she was extravagant, in spite of all his good advice. Trains at three, at six, at midnight. She'd go whenever he was tired of her. She was lucky to see him even for a minute, any one as important and busy as he was. They planned the day, luncheon, theater, cocktails, the six o'clock express. Rodney would take the same train as far as his town.

It was only, thought Rodney, as they finished a leisurely and perfect luncheon, that Lilian was such a delectable combination. Modern, successful, and yet as helpless, as amusingly useless as a Victorian heroine. Food, for instance, and money, and how to get places. It would be easy to lose his head—He couldn't think the world well lost—He had to think of the children, the business, Alison. But not just now; not for a few minutes out of a lifetime. Lilian was singing, under her breath, the orchestra's tune, "Parlez-vous d'amour," her eyes challenging him.

"They'll shake us out with the crumbs." Rodney held her coat. "We've missed half the picture."

"Picture! Who cares? When I can look at you."

In the darkened theater the soft fur of her coat lay under his fingers, fragrance from her hair so near his shoulder teased at him. He did not see the lighted screen, although he laughed when Lilian chuckled.

The day had ended when they came out of the theater, pale November gold, thinned by street lamps, showing behind gray buildings. Lilian, exploring her green purse, shrieked, "I've lost it, Razzles! My lovely vanity you gave me! It must have slipped to the floor." Rodney helped an indifferent usher in the search. The flash-light explored dim recesses, shadowy heads jerked disapproval at the interruption of dreams. No use. Rodney tipped the usher and stumbled up the aisle, breathless from standing on his head. "Never mind." Lilian looked tragic. "Some one must have pocketed it. We'll buy another."

He jibed at her as they stood at the jeweler's counter. "How many do you lose a week? You do need a care-taker." Her fingers moved delicately among baubles. On the wall a clock rang two measures of chimes. "I don't want to hurry you, but we've only half an hour."

"You can't." Her eyes mocked him. "This is important." Finally her finger touched a jade oblong. "This, unless it's too extravagant."

"It is, but never mind." Rodney had his wallet open. "No, don't wrap it."

"I have to go back to the hotel," Lilian drawled a little. "To get a bag. So we can have cocktails. To drink to the day."

Rodney suggested to the taxi driver that anything short of getting a ticket— He bent his wrist to look at his watch. They might make it.

"You order, and I'll get the bag." He whisked Lilian through the lobby. Lucky the cocktail bar was right here. "Where's the check?"

"Oh, Razzles!" Lilian opened her eyes wide, and laughed. "In that vanity!"

"Good Lord! Come on, then, see if you can get the bag without it. Here, bring us a couple of old-fashions," he shouted to a waiter, "we'll be back." No clock in sight. He hated the way this pressure ripped across the mood of the day. Lilian's eyes did excellent work with the parcel clerk, in spite of orders. That little green one, marked L. S. He had to try the key. Okey. "Now we can't sit down, darling." Rodney groaned as Lilian sank into a chair.

"Razzles, you aren't a bit flattering! Aren't there lots of trains?"

Rodney drank his standing, the pineapple sliding against his nose. "I'm sorry." He dabbed at his nose. "But there's that damned dinner."

"Oh, of course! Why didn't you remind me? Come! Let's run."

Another precious interim, while the waiting cab edged out of a block. Rodney sat forward on the seat, pushing

with every muscle. "Get your ticket ready," he said. "I'll buy mine on the train."

She laughed, the low, husky laugh which had always tingled in his ears. "You're so funny, Razzles, when you act like this. You're so-so razzled!"

Rodney's chin moved forward a good two inches, but he looked at the meter. He'd have the change ready. "My God, you haven't more bags here to collect?"

She hadn't. What happened at the gate was a matter of a guard who supposed the passengers were all aboard, plus desperation on Rodney's part. He flashed Lilian's tickets under the descending punch, and ran, bag in one hand, Lilian swung from the other, across an echoing space, up a flight of stairs, and on to the platform of the rear coach. They stood in the narrow passageway, and before Rodney had drawn a satisfying breath, the train moved.

"Now you aren't cross any more, are you?" Lilian brushed curls into place.

Suddenly Rodney wasn't. Lilian couldn't realize how embarrassing it might have been— But the comforting motion of the train carried away his tenseness. He could enjoy this last hour. "Let's find your section. Here, boy, where's car 506?" Lilian walked ahead, pausing at each heavy door, and as he thrust a hand past her for the steel knob, she swayed against him, turning their progress into a series of briefly hinted embraces. Then, sitting beside her in the half privacy of the section, Rodney watched her profile, clear on the grimy window, his own dark head less distinct.

"Let's pretend you're coming to Chicago." Lilian lifted slow eyelids.

"Section six, suh?" The porter's white coat crackled at Rodney's elbow. Lilian presented her slip. "And you too, suh?" No, Rodney was getting off at Auburndale. "Auburndale? We don't make no stop there."

Rodney was tolerant. Hadn't he got off there less than a month ago, when he came from New York? Yes, that was it. From New York. No stops for local passengers. The porter was delighted with the predicament. He'd get the conductor. A vein throbbed in Rodney's temple. This,

finally, would be too much. When the conductor, gray and firmly dour, had gone, he looked at Lilian. If she laughed now!

It was past midnight when Alison drove into the yard, Rodney humped beside her, his lips compressed against fragments of apology, entreaty, explanation, which bumped inchoately against his teeth. What an evening! First Lilian, sulking because he'd had to spend the two hours on the train tearing back and fourth in an attempt to be let off the damned thing. Then all the trouble he'd had finding a man to drive him back from the junction. Then Alison, who did have his clothes laid out, to be sure, but who would say nothing except, with that long-suffering look, "Please hurry, Rodney!" Then when he'd tried heroically to make a joke of it for Holcombe, he'd offended him. He'd meant to be humorous, referring to Auburndale as a spot where trains wouldn't even hesitate, and Holcombe, pulling at his gray mustache, had said in the loud voice of a fussy little man, "You've stayed too long in New York to appreciate us. Ex-patriated." The Holcombes hadn't waited dinner, thanks to Alison's telephoning, and all Rodney had for food was that awful meringue which had lodged just between his floating ribs. Having started wrong, he'd gone sliding down hill, farther and farther away from any common ground with the State Senator, the man from Washington, or Holcombe and his bank. "After all, Graham, you aren't familiar with our problems here." Even an implication that his concern for a new building might have a personal cant. Rodney felt his eyeballs scorch. With the livelihood of several thousand men tied to his factory— And Alison hadn't tried once to help him out.

"What the hell did you say when you 'phoned Holcombe?" he exploded, as Alison ran the car into the garage, the white wall hurling light back over windshield and faces. "I never saw him so touchy."

"It's hard to forgive your guest of honor for letting you down." Alison snapped off the lights and stepped out. "He had wild duck for you, too."

"Letting down? I couldn't stop the train."

Alison shut one of the garage doors. "Carelessness is always a slight," she said. Rodney made his exit with a bounce. "I can't understand—" she banged the second door—"how you ever got on that train. They're so careful at the gate."

Holcombe had said that, too, as if he thought Rodney had invented a poor yarn. Rodney stalked into the house and flung himself into a chair near the fireplace. A charred end of log sent up thin smoke-spirals. Alison stood in the doorway. "It's chilly here, isn't it?" She let the velvet cloak slip from her shoulders, catching the folds over one arm, fingers untangling a bit of black lace from a clasp. "I wonder if Greg looked at the fire. Why, Stella, you still up?"

Stella, hair tousled, fuzzy yellow bathrobe tied tight like an hour-glass, strolled into the room. "I didn't get home too early myself," she said, "and I had to see if the bad penny had turned up." Her eyes droll, she curled on the divan.

"Where you been, baby?" Rodney jerked off his muffler. He felt better.

"Senior party." Stella yawned. "But where *you* been?"

"Did Greg see to the furnace?" asked Alison.

"Oh, I think so, Mother. He always does. He's been in bed hours."

Rodney stood up, to shake off his top-coat. He saw Stella admiring his elegance. "Could I have anything to eat? That ghastly meringue is right there, alone." He pointed.

"Why, yes." Something wary, bird-cautious, in the angle of Alison's head. "Yes."

Stella waggled a finger impudently at her father. She waited until the kitchen door clicked, and then, leaning toward him, said, "Poor Father! Did you miss the train? Oh-h! I am sorry for you!"

"I'm glad some one was."

"You must keep engagements." She made a face. "It's a nobligation."

Rodney shouted with laughter; the child had caught precisely the earnest solicitude in Alison's voice. Then laughter shriveled on his lips, for he saw Alison again in the doorway, and on her face a blankness in which Rodney found himself accused of more disloyalty than he had ever intended.

"Stella was laying me out for being so late," he said, hastily.

"I heard her," was Alison's quiet rejoinder.

Stella's face paled with embarrassment. "I didn't mean—"

"You didn't mean me to overhear." Alison stood more erect. "Why, here comes Greg, too. Just in time!"

Gregory flapped through the doorway, pajamas hitched up in wrinkles above skinny shanks. "In time for what? I heard a pow-wow, and thought I'd join, in case there was food." His nasal drawl meant he was being funny, thought Rodney; if he springs one of his clodhopper jokes—"Yes'm, I shook down the cat and put the furnace out and wrote a note to the milkman giving him all our love and kisses."

"Shut up, you idiot!" Stella jumped to her feet.

"Why should he shut up?" Alison looked at the three of them. Her hands crept up to hide under folds of black lace at her breast; her only movement was a little ripple of muscles along the soft white arms as her fingers wrencheded together. "At least he makes fun of me to my face! Do you think I like it, having to keep at all of you all the time, and being the butt of private jokes for my trouble?" Anger glowed in her skin, vibrated in her voice. "I've kept still all these years—" Anger burned them off, the dull years; she was luminous with emotion.

"Alison, really!" Rodney got to his feet, his ears hot. "I'm sorry if we hurt you. It was unintentional. Don't you think—"

"You do it all the time. It makes you feel superior to me. You can't stop me, Rodney. Do you think I like running your house, ordering food, coal, paying bills, seeing to the battery, the tires, Stella's practicing, Greg's lessons, sicken-ing details I have to think about forever? I hate it. I hate it as much as you would! I haven't a minute when I can be myself. I don't even know what myself is, any more! Maybe some people like it, being practical, responsible. I'm not that kind of woman. I've just had to be. I'm tired of it. When we first got married—" she looked at Rodney, bewilderment dimming anger for a moment— "I had to try dreadfully hard to remember things, to manage things. But I thought it was

my job, to leave you quite free for important things like your business. You can hire people to be useful. You have to pay them, though. Money—or love. I might have gone on putting up with it—your combined heedlessness and selfishness. Children are that way until they grow up. But you wouldn't grow up. I'm worn out, being the only adult in a family."

"Alison, you're making us all most uncomfortable." Rodney was dignified. "If you have a grudge against me, surely that's a private matter."

"No, it isn't private. It's a family matter. You made a mistake, staying in New York such long stretches, dropping in to dazzle us, like visiting royalty. I found I liked having hours of my own. You never even wondered what I did. Since you came back, it's been intolerable! The children—" Alison glanced at them, and for a moment tenderness altered her face, but with a queer flicker, as if it trailed a broken wing. "You're like a contagious disease. They catch your feeling." Her eyes, hard and brilliant again, met Rodney's. "I have to be reality for you all, humdrum, plain reality. I'm exhausted. I'm going away. I don't care what you do."

"Mother!" Stella flung herself at Alison. "You can't go away! Oh, I didn't mean to hurt you. I didn't know—"

"Don't cry." Alison pried off the girl's fingers. "I have to go. You never change anything with words. You have to do something."

The three of them drew a little toward each other, listening to her feet on the stairs, resolute, unhesitating. Rodney faced the beseeching, amazed, guilty stares of the two. Gregory hitched up his pajamas and tried to swallow his disturbance.

"Can't you *do* something, Father?" Stella winked away tears. "Why, she doesn't even like us any more!"

"My gosh, she has to like us!" Greg's face was scarlet. "Our mother!"

"It's dreadful." Stella rubbed at her eyes. "It makes me feel hollow."

Rodney cleared his throat. Inexcusable of Alison, saying such outrageous things. He must move gingerly: an abyss

threatened where the earth had been forever solid. "Now don't be alarmed," he began. "We are a bunch of nuisances, and your mother was tired. I'll talk with her. She'll be herself again in the morning." He flashed them his most consoling, friendly smile. "She didn't mean half she said."

"I think she did." Stella's eyes dilated. "We were rotten to make fun of her, when all the time she didn't like looking after us."

For the first time in his life Rodney saw in Stella an intimation of doubt—doubt of his wisdom, his perfection. "Now see here!" he propelled the two of them genially to the stairs. "Run along to bed. It'll be all right in the morning. We'll reform! Never be late, always wash behind the ears. Good-night, and don't brood." His good humor swept them up the stairs, and he watched them out of sight before he relaxed his stalwart pose.

As he undressed he stopped once, shoe in hand. Alison couldn't have known why he went to Detroit, could she? That would account— Impossible. Just a woman's mood. He dodged the edge of the abyss, he held his thoughts from peering down. Before he slept that quality in Alison's anger, its luminous intensity, rushed at him again, not as a visual image of Alison, but like flame leaping at him in the darkness.

He woke to the sound of rain thrashed against the window, of papers swishing in a wet wind. He sprang up hastily to close the window and stepped as hastily out of a cold puddle back to the rug. Past eight. Funny Alison hadn't— He scrambled into dressing gown and slippers, and then saw the little cocked hat on the floor just inside the door. Alison always folded notes into— He balanced it on his palm, sucking in a quick breath between his teeth.

I'll leave the car at the station. I'll send a mailing address in a few days.

Another sentence had been started and erased; a large A straddled the indecipherable marks. Rodney jerked open the door, the note crumpled under tight fingers. He remembered other departures of Alison, infrequent, brief, and

the lists of instructions she had always left. Not a word here! That she could go without advice to last them until she returned—the finality of that rolled like thunder over Rodney's head.

Rodney climbed the stairs slowly. Alison's door was ajar, her room in order. But not a word. His imperative "Greg!" brought the boy's head turtling out of blankets. "It's late! Get up at once."

As he opened Stella's door the wind yanked the shade out of the lowered window, to flop and bang in the rain. No note here. Stella sat upright. "Why, Father!" The green shade writhed against the house. "Father—" she whispered.

"Pull in that shade, and hurry down. It's time you two learned to get up before noon." Rodney started down the stairs, to find Mollie squinting up.

"Is Mrs. Graham sick? I never noticed the time because she always comes out by seven." Her round face hung anxiously above the newel post.

Rodney heard rustles behind him. Stella and Gregg were listening. "No. Mrs. Graham has gone out of town for a short visit."

"Wha—" Mollie couldn't get her mouth shut over her disbelief. "She never said a word to me, only she'd get the eggs this morning."

"Things came up," said Rodney. If the girl had waited until he had shaved and dressed—"We felt the change would do her good."

"She never said a word... or what to have for dinner—"

"She had to leave at once." Rodney tried a smile in place of further explanation. He heard mutters as he passed Mollie and closed his door.

Breakfast was silent as well as eggless. Mollie hovered at the door. "How long's she going to stay? Who's going to do my ordering?"

"It all depends," said Rodney. "Mrs. Graham felt sure you could carry on." If the children would brace up! Greg was humped in his chair, shoulders up to his ears; Stella's movements were furtive. They trailed him to the study.

"Now what we must do," he began, briskly, "is to

systematize everything. Stella can run the house, Greg errands and the furnace, I have my work."

"Will she come back?" Stella's voice dragged with fear.

"Of course!" Rodney laughed at them. "After she's had a vacation from us. Don't be a pair of idiots. Now where's my coat? I've got to be off. On foot, too! I'll try to be back at one. The house seems cold, Greg. Have you—" He stopped, and the inquiry hung in the air, a reproach, an echo.

"Well, my gosh!" Greg scowled. "I didn't mean to forget it." He rushed off.

"Do the best you can, little Star." Rodney's ulster crackled. Stella made no response. Alison needn't have shocked the child so. Why, she actually looked older, with her face twisted around a thought. "And don't worry." He poked about the closet floor with a walking stick. "Where are those rubbers?"

Stella poked too, knocking down hats. She didn't know. Rodney couldn't wait any longer. His umbrella? Stella found that; she and Gregg huddled in the doorway as Rodney stepped out into the rain. He couldn't even walk fast. Sidewalks, roads were filmed with treacherous ice. As he walked, stiff-kneed against a fall, the fact of Alison's departure pushed out from the casualness he had thrown over it, demanding to be faced. It was as if the sun had cried out, "I'm tired of showing up every morning!" Or part of his body, a useful, unregarded organ like his heart, had removed itself, saying, "I'm sick of pumping your blood!" Suppose—he skidded, regained his balance—she meant not to come back. Leaving him free. Free? With the business, with the children. Take Stella—for the first time he had had an intimation that what he did, what he was, might affect her adoration. As she grew older—

At the office, Collins hadn't come in. "He went home early yesterday," explained the secretary. "He was afraid he'd caught something." A wire from an eastern contractor, canceling an order. Can't wait, no answer to inquiry of 30th inst. Inquiry in yesterday's mail. Carload of metal gone astray. Delay in production. Green hands instead of

overtime for skilled workers. Rodney's nerves jerked into knots. All this mess because he'd taken a day off. Holcombe down on him. Even Alison's crazy behavior. Rodney spent much of the morning bellowing over the telephone, his exasperation mounting as he bellowed at the stupidity of factory superintendents, car checkers, advertising copy writers.

Stella telephoned. A huge coal truck was in the yard, the coal window was padlocked, and where was the key? Well, what (in a wail) should they do? Rodney, curtly, was busy and didn't know. Half an hour later, the secretary, only a rim of lipstick left on her harassed mouth, said, "It's your daughter again, Mr. Graham."

"Ask her what she— No, give it to me." Rodney heard Stella, breathless. The men wanted to be paid. They'd broken the window to put in the coal.

"What do you want me to do? Stop work and come home?"

"I'm so sorry, Father. I know you're busy. But—"

"Send them down here. I've nothing to do but entertain coal heavers." Stella's voice, shaky, caught the receiver back to his ear.

"Please, Father, Mollie says what do you want for dinner to-morrow?"

"Good Lord, I don't care!" He replaced the telephone with deliberate care, just to show the world he wasn't out of patience.

At two Rodney set the lock and closed the door upon an empty office. Hunger was hollow within him, but he wouldn't stop for a comforting lunch at the club. He'd go home to his deserted house, his abandoned children. How could Alison— Just then he remembered the car. One more compulsion. He hadn't driven for years, but of course you don't forget how.

The crossing gates creaked down as he neared the station, and he had to wait while a train from the west steamed to a halt, its trucks and pipes bearded with dirty icicles. If he could go aboard, letting it draw him with increasing speed away from all this muddle! Instead he plodded under the

lifting gates and walked twice around the parking square before he found the car. On the seat lay Alison's driving gloves, not limp, but curled like hands, her firm grasp still animating them. Rodney thrust them into a door-pocket. More confusing than death, this flight of hers. More equivocal. His throat smarted with pungent self-pity. Time enough to decide how he felt after he got this damned car home. He ground at the starter, he collected advice from a delivery boy, a truck driver, his face scarlet, hands clammy, nerves quivering under his knees. Finally, popping like a machine gun, the motor caught, and Rodney could drive away from the grinning observers. He'd take back streets, dodging Saturday traffic. His hands grew warm again, and he drove more swiftly. The rain was freezing on the windshield. He had a minor sense of triumph, gliding down a long deserted hill. He sounded a loud blast as a car backed from a sloping driveway near the foot of the hill. Was the fool deaf? Rodney tried to swerve, he stepped on the brake pedal, he felt his car turn into a self-willed gyroscope, revolving, mounting the curb, meeting an iron lamppost with the shuddering thud of crumpling metal, while irresistibly Rodney catapulted forward. Vaguely he heard shouts, "Damned fool! Driving like that! What the—" but he was concentrated in a wet and scarlet numbness.

Sunday evening Rodney lay on the divan, forehead throbbing under the bandage, tongue exploring the gap in his jaw. "You're lucky," the doctor had said. "Most of 'em fracture their skulls and jaw-bones. What's a bump and a tooth?" Rodney shifted his length, groaning, and ran a finger over swollen lip. What a day! He had come from the doctor's office, tottering into the house on the taxi driver's arm, and Stella wouldn't stop crying. Greg, going out to hunt for him in the late afternoon, had seen the wrecked car. Poor kids, deciding they had lost both parents! Then Stella's weeping, it turned out, was as much about a turkey as about him. Greg had to explain. "She ordered a turkey, see, because you like it. Mollie was mad anyway, because one of my white mice got out. She said we were trouble enough when our Mother was here, and it wasn't Thanks-

giving, so why should she roast a turkey, all that bother, and anyway she was going home till Mother came back."

Rodney struggled out of his blood-rusty coat and let his stiff body wearily down in a chair. "All this fuss about a turkey?" His thick tongue made queer sounds. "Please, Stella! I need some ice for this jaw."

"It leered at me!" Stella shuddered. "We thought you were dead!"

"The ole car looked as if somebody got killed," said Greg. "Wot a spin!"

"If you'd get the ice and my bathrobe, instead of gawping!"

The ice-bag, when Stella brought it, was bumpy with solid cubes. Rodney carried his aching head and the ice-bag to the kitchen, to demonstrate how to crack ice. On the table bulked the turkey, peaked breast blue-mottled, head dangling. "It's full of its own insides, too." Stella hovered beside him, troubled and humble, scrambling for bouncing cubes. "I didn't know what to do."

"It doesn't matter. I couldn't eat." Rodney screwed on the top. He could have eaten—something hot and soft—"I'll have to get to bed."

This morning it had been hours before they brought in a tray, hours with whiffs of burnt toast and strange, unidentified odors. He felt less rocky by to-night. The doctor had been in to dress his forehead, had assured him the pain in his spine was nothing but nerve shock. "Where's your wife?" he finished. "I can show her how to change this dressing."

She was out of town. Rodney, stiffly, hadn't thought it important enough to send for her. The doctor, after a glance at Stella, tremulous with sympathy, said he'd better drop in again in the morning.

The telephone rang frequently. How the devil had so many people heard? Greg, sulky, said he'd called up the police last night. For an instant, like a single snowflake drifting from a low, dull sky, a thought of Alison whirled downward from Rodney's determination not to think of her. She might hear, she might be frightened. No, she had said, she

was proving, that she didn't care. Stella and Greg wandered about the house in a blank restlessness. "Why don't you take a walk? Go downtown and get your dinner." Oh, no, they didn't want to do that. Greg had turned on the radio. The noise was a defense against the aimless feeling of suspended activity the house held. The boy crouched in front of the case, all angles, his long fingers twirling dials, fusillades of static interrupting music. "It's that tube," he said. "Mother—I mean I forgot to get a new one. I can't pick up a thing but Chicago."

"Leave it on," said Rodney. "You better see if you can't help Stella. She seems to be doing things in the kitchen." He could hear them banging around. After an hour or so they'd appear with another egg. He moved restlessly, flinging an arm along the divan. In the morning he'd have to get to the dentist's, somehow. He pulled himself erect at a new sound from the radio, a husky, sensuous voice, singing, "I can't forget him, I tries to forget him—" Squeak, splutter, whrarr! Rodney stared at the radio's geometrical face. Lilian! The whrarring was a noise set up by his own nerves, precisely the way he felt about her after that last hour on the train, with her lack of sympathy, her sulking because he couldn't sit down and hold her hand. "I never forgets my ma-an!" Rodney stood up. He would never have looked at her if Alison hadn't been so critical, so aloof. All he wanted was a little appreciation, a little warm admiration. But Lilian was only a shadow of irritation in the bleak cloud which engulfed him. At least he didn't have to listen to her now! As he moved around the divan toward the radio, an accusing voice spun him around like a toy, startled into wood.

"You aren't hurt!" Alison stood in the doorway, her mouth drooping, her eyelids heavy with exhaustion. "Walking around, playing the radio."

"You sound disappointed!" Rodney steadied himself against a chair. "It's too bad I'm not flat—"

"'Extent of injuries unknown,' the paper said. Such dreadful things—I kept seeing you. I had to come." Her voice was faint with her imaginings.

"But I am hurt!" Rodney's heart thudded at the pit of his stomach. "What did you come back for? You were sick of me! Fed up!" Behind him came the languorous tones of a new song. *Deeper than night, darker than thunder, blinder than sight—* As if Lillian were in the room!

"I had to come!" Alison cried out. "You know I had to come!" Her passion leaped, white flame, against the sultriness of the song.

"But why? I'm selfish and brutal." (To tear us asunder, moaned Lillian.) Excitement, anger-tipped, raced in Rodney's wounded head.

"It was true! Every word I said. But when I thought you were hurt—"

"Selfish, childish—" The s's blurred on his tongue.

Alison's eyelids quivered, her mouth changed, and suddenly she began to laugh. "You—you sound so funny, lithping," she gasped, "when you want to be imprethive—"

"Don't you mock me!" Rodney strode forward, laid his hands on her shoulder. "Alison, stop it!" The radio yawped.

She stopped, catching a long breath. "Your poor head! She lifted her hands within his arms, touching the bandage, touching his swollen lip. "But you aren't smashed utterly. Oh, why did you try to drive—"

"Never mind." He pulled her toward the divan. "You sit down! We've got things to settle."

"That awful noise, Rodney! Couldn't you—"

Rodney stood behind her, fingers touching the dial. (To tear us asunder!) Alison threw aside her hat; threads of fair hair glistened in the light, centered the light of the room, of the house in her bent head. He turned the dial and the sound ceased. A sentimental regret for lost romantic illusion pinged an instant at his nerves, and was lost in a deeper vibration of triumph. Alison had to come back! For all her tolerance, her common sense, her refusal of admiring worship—she had to come back to him! For a shattering moment he thought that he must tell her how, with her going, down crashed the center pole, the canvas of the tent smothering, crushing him, so that he could not struggle to his feet, could find no clear space to go on with any of his

glittering act. Perhaps she knew. He dropped beside her, his voice not steady, his tongue clumsy.

"It's been a long time since you admitted you cared a whoop about me," he said.

"No longer," said Alison, "than the time since you've asked."

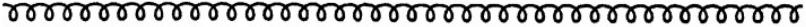
"But I want to know—" A crash from the kitchen interrupted him, a crash jangling, minute-long, followed by profound silence. "Never mind." He checked Alison's movement. "You can see to that later. I must know—am I anything more than a bad habit you can't get rid of?"

"You ask *me* that?" Her eyes were dark, her mouth rebellious. "Oh, Rodney!"

Before Rodney could speak, a shout came along the hall, "Father!" followed by Gregory, tripping over a rug, halting, his face blank.

"Jiminy Cripes!" He stared at Alison, and his blankness altered into warm relief. "Why, Mother!" He swallowed. "Did you have a nice trip? I—I hope you're going to stay a while."

"I think I am." Alison stood up, shaking off her coat. "Now show me—" laughter crinkled the edge of her words—"what you've been up to."



UNCOMMON PEOPLE

THOMAS HILL was dismissing the class after its final meeting, shuffling notes into his portfolio with cold, clumsy fingers. He flung up his dark head in a silent snort of indifference, but since no one noticed the gesture, it did his cold heart no good. Dolts, he thought, watching the students pouring out through the funnel of the door. Three months ago, when luck and illness in the department had dropped this composition class into his hands, he had thought it the beginning of his career. Young people, college freshmen, he would stir them from lethargy, he would inspire them—*aux armes, O citoyens!* After two meetings the chairman of the department had summoned him. Mother of one of the young females complaining that her daughter was being taught communism. “We haven’t hired you to expound your theories, Hill. Stick to commas, sentence structure.”

“Muzzled!” Thomas had said, bitterly.

“No.” Baxter had smiled, tolerantly. “Just leashed. Leashed to your job. Stick to it. If I hired you to paint a fence, I shouldn’t expect you to prescribe for my sick child. Do what you’re paid for.”

“Muzzled.” Thomas scorned such temporizing. But after that he had resorted to implications: what I might say, if the policy of this huge, capitalistic institution— The trouble was that the dolts didn’t care. He worked himself into this state of chilly exhaustion, and all they cared was whether

he'd give them a passing mark. Now it was over. He had knuckled under enough to please the department. "Keep in touch with me," Baxter had said. "There may be an opening in the fall." He sent a last, harried look about the empty classroom and rushed out, to swing recklessly down flights of stairs and out of the building. He slowed a moment, passing tennis courts where men in shorts and sweaters made amazing lunges at scarlet balls, and beyond them in the field young figures in gray cotton flannel flung themselves up from the earth, clattered against poles, came down again. Child's play. His blue eyes, his long mouth were hard with scorn.

He had a half hour to make the night bus for Boston. Excitement burned in his ears, ran warm through his nervous chill. If he hadn't compromised enough to satisfy Baxter, he wouldn't have this chance for the summer. A trip abroad, expenses paid, a bonus besides if he would drive, all for tutoring a kid. As long as there were still capitalists, he might as well benefit. Only first he had to make this flying visit home, to satisfy his mother. He had left his suitcase in the office. The secretary, sole occupant at this time of day, was as always oblivious of his presence.

"Did you make a note of my forwarding address?" Thomas raised his voice.

"What?" She didn't stop typing. "Oh, yes. Same as yesterday, isn't it?"

"I wasn't at all sure you heard me." Thomas picked up the suitcase.

"How could I help it?" Her fingers rattled the keys. She wouldn't be impressed, not by any cub assistant.

Sycophants, that's all those girls were. No one to whom he should say good-by. He clattered down the stairs and dashed the half block to the subway entrance. The train took up his urgency, its hurtling roar a projection of his feeling. Too bad he wasn't on his way to the boat. He leaned in such expectancy toward the moment he would sail that these days which intervened seemed a chunk of frozen time. He didn't want to go home. But his mother had been stubborn about his coming. Some matters about the property,

he hadn't been back for two years, he was going so far away. He supposed she was lonely without his father, even if she did have a roomer or two. Oh, well! His hand crept under his blue coat, touched the flat square of passport.

New York to Boston, Boston to Portland. He bumped and dozed and dreamed. Waking once, he thought he was on his way to New York just after the death of his father, a boy shy and fierce, not yet used to a long, thin body which had taken on the semblance of a man so rapidly that he wore it as a disguise. He straightened in the leather seat. Incredible that he could have changed so much in three years! Why, he'd been nothing but a—vegetable then! Portland to Rockland, in the afternoon. He looked out at a thin, rigorous landscape, fog-misted, gray ledges, dark spruces hard and permanent, hints of coming spring in valleys between the hills, where birches and maples blurred through the fog in green or rust. Thomas resisted the excitement mounting within him, a recognition of the season, as if like the fields, like the trees, he had waited through the winter for the turning of the sun, for the stirring of growth. He was done with all that, he had outgrown it.

Henry Flint, his mother's hired man, was waiting with the Ford.

"Told your ma," he said, whistling through yellow stumps of teeth, "that you'd be too stuck up a city fellow to ride with us."

"Hell," said Thomas. "Does that can still run?"

Henry smoothed the dusty hood. "You mean, will she stop."

Thomas lifted the suitcase into the rear seat.

"'Sa reefer there," said Henry. "She sent it. Wiper's broke. Have to leave the windshield open. Coldest spring ever I see." At his foot on the starter the car vibrated to every nut in an orgy of preliminary fight. Thomas didn't want the coat. His father's. He could see it, hanging slack from bent shoulders. But the evening air was knife-sharp, steel-pure, aching in his lungs. He pulled on the rough coat and sat beside Henry. It was a kind of submission, to being a child, a son. His father had worn this very garment the

night they'd had that worst quarrel. "You're no better than a Bolshevik! If that's what you learn in college, you can stay home." Thomas had tried passionately to explain.

"You don't know what's happening, back here in the country."

"You young ass!" His father had roared at him. "The blasphemies mouthed by foreigners aren't what's happening. What happens is in my mill, in this village—"

His mother had hurried from the kitchen, her glance bird-swift from him to his father. "Silly boy, showing off!" She stood between them, soft, defenseless, to be wounded if they persisted. "Arguing while my popovers settle! Come to supper." What she had said to his father Thomas did not know. What she had said to him was, "Keep your notions to yourself, Tom. Your father's have served him for a lifetime, and yours are still green. He's enough to worry him in the business." And then, "He's that proud of you, getting a scholarship and all. It won't hurt you to keep your mouth shut."

Henry swooped down a hill to get a head start for the next climb. The fog was sucked over the open windshield, the road was a river of gray between dark masses of trees. That winter, while Thomas was at college, his father had died. A stroke in the mill office. Thomas remembered that drive, the horses plodding through drifted snow, the early stars like snow crystals blown across a wide black sky. The snow drifts had not delayed death. For days he couldn't rid his ears of the sound which frozen earth made, knocking against a coffin lid. After a strange week in which it seemed that days would never again march forward, he had asked his mother, "Would you like to have me stay here?"

"Stay here?" Her thought moved slowly out of some darkness. "Why?"

"You'll be lonely." For the first time he saw that the firm white skin of her face showed a fretwork of tiny wrinkles about eyes and mouth, as if grief had spread a net for all her youth.

"I'll be lonely," she said, quietly. "But you must go back

to your school. If you cared about the mill, it would be different."

His father's affairs were in order. A new will—drawn after that quarrel—left everything to his mother, except for a few thousand to be held in trust until Thomas was twenty-five. He couldn't have had it anyway, with the banks shutting down.

Henry swung off the macadam onto a dirt road, slew-ing in a rut. "Frost ain't been out long enough to work on the roads," he said. "Couldn't use this short cut till couple weeks back."

"Some folks might say you couldn't now!" Thomas grabbed at the door.

"Your ma said to hustle. School ma'am has a shindig to-night."

"Is the school ma'am still here?" He didn't want a stranger around.

"Three weeks more. Pleasant girl, Laurel is. Real com-mon. You'd never know she'd been off to school and col-
lidge."

Meaning, thought Thomas, that he'd been too silent. Less than a half mile now. The fog had thinned as they came inland, and the tall pines walked forward to meet them, breathing out a green drenched odor. He knew the sound of fog dripping from their needles. Like his father's coat, the place got him by the throat, enfolded him. "How are things, anyhow?" he asked, abruptly. "Bad as ever?"

"Ain't no better, couldn't say how much worse." The Ford clattered over a wooden bridge. Branch of the mill stream. "Be all right if folks didn't need money. Fellow on radio says things is picking up. Ain't seen it." The dirt road dove between old wooden buildings, emerged on the single main street of the village.

"Picking up? They're blowing up," said Thomas. "You don't listen to that bilge on the air, do you? Last squawks of the capitalist system."

"Huh?" Henry drove slowly past a two-story white building, the windows roughly boarded; behind it a gray fence enclosed a yard where gray buildings were ranked

along the river. "Soon's the Republicans get back—" and then, strongly, "Damned shame your Pa had to die. Town needed him." He rounded the corner past the mill and climbed the hill toward the square white house. Thomas peered back: in the twilight a chimney ragged from fallen brick spoke of his father's absence.

He could see his mother as they entered the driveway. She had heard the Ford complaining at the hill. Silhouetted against the lighted hallway, her wiry figure, in its tenseness, its withheld motion, was like a bell struck in a deep vibration of welcome. Thomas ran up the steps. She cried a little, holding him, brushed away the tears and laughter, drawing him in where light shone full on them. "You're thin," she said. "Aren't you taller, or had I forgotten? You must be tired after that long trip." She held him off to look at him, her eyes very blue under dark lashes, her mouth unsteady, her dark curly hair drawn back into a little knot. Except for a gray curl at one temple and the faint puckering of her skin, she looked as she had always looked, as far back as he could remember, and he was himself at any age, boy come home.

"You're all dressed up." He touched the blue silk. "I'm not tired."

"I promised Laurel I'd go to her exhibition. Before I knew you were coming to-night. It won't be late. You wouldn't like to come?"

Her hesitancy restored him to his advanced age and wisdom. "No, thanks. Oh, I don't mind your going. I've got all day to-morrow." That strange girl must be lurking around somewhere. "I'll wash up."

"Supper's ready," said his mother. "You come right down. I'll take the jacket." She folded it over an arm. "It's funny, Tommy. I leave it hanging on his hook and not a moth ever got into it. I like to see it there."

Thomas climbed the stairs to the upper hall. Sentiment waited for you at every turn, making your throat feel queer, softening your muscles. You had to watch out for it. That girl must have the south room, with the closed door. He peered in at the double four-poster in the front room. Had

his mother cried at night, lonely in that wide bed? The crystal scent bottle with the stopper he had broken still held the middle of the dresser. He might have left his own room yesterday, so unchanged it stood. Hurriedly he washed, combed his thick, dark hair at the mirror of the walnut bureau, looking at a face which seemed less his own than a family face, his mother's eyes, hints of his father in square forehead and long chin.

His mother and the girl were already seated at the table. "This is my son, Laurel. Thomas, I'd like you to meet Miss Laurel Mitchell. Laurel's from down Eastport way, but she likes here, she says."

Thomas looked at the top of the girl's head, silky hair, light brown, curling at the nape of her neck as she turned slowly. "How do you do." He shook hands hastily. Small, secretive face, grave wide-spaced eyes almost the color of her hair: did she paint, or was that flush excitement at meeting him? She murmured a glad to meet you and looked down at her plate. Sly minx, getting round his mother. Thomas seated himself, backbone stiff.

"Now you needn't hurry, Thomas. I'll pick things up when I get home."

"If you'd rather stay here, Mrs. Hill—" Voice like a kitten.

"I told Thomas he could come too, if he wanted to."

"He wouldn't care about a school exhibition."

Thomas frowned, but she was smiling at her sliced ham. "Not to-night, I think," he said.

"I can remember," his mother smiled, "when you wouldn't have missed."

"That was before—" he stopped. That girl was laughing at him! "I have a good deal to see to, in preparation for my trip." That caught his mother's attention. She looked at him, seeing the ocean widen between them.

"It's so far." She sighed. "New York was far enough." But before she could linger on the importance of this journey, the girl rose.

"If you'll excuse me, I'll get my things. You know how the boys will act if I'm not there." The movement of her

body was quiet and graceful. Without a glance at Thomas she had gone, and his mother jumped up.

"Just help yourself to pie, it's Northern Spy, your favorite. You're sure you'll be all right?" But she was as good as halfway down the hill.

Thomas heard the front door close; he heard the Ford stutter. The girl drove, did she? He stabbed gloomily at the pie. Coming home ought to be different. Banners and drums. Instead folks went right on with their small concerns, unable to grasp what life was like away from exhibitions and such. Not that he expected them to sit back and listen admiringly to him. But a little recognition—He ate a second triangle of pie.

The clock on the mantel shelf grew noisy in the quiet house. Thomas could see the bright pendulum where paint had flaked from the landscape on the glass door. Only eight-thirty. Empty time rolled over him like a fogbank. Small wonder that men who stayed here knew nothing of what happened in the world. His father, sitting an hour with his paper, well-fed, waiting for ten o'clock, when he would climb the stairs and sleep until another day began, exactly like the one just ended. Small wonder the clock ticked more loudly than the distant thunder of change. Take that school teacher. She probably never had a thought which reached past the blackboard, unless, like all women, she thought about trapping some poor fellow into marriage. She ought to hear what Wolfner, the fellow who roomed across from him, had to say about marriage. "I tell you, Hill, it's a trap invented by the capitalists to snare the common man, to chain him to a woman and brats so he doesn't dare revolt." What would Wolfner do in a place like this? Thomas could see his dark, hooked face, his eager hands. He belonged in crowded, smoky rooms, in city swarms. Not here.

Thomas got to his feet. He would stroll around the place and go to bed. He stood a moment in the kitchen: almanac on its hook, woodbox piled with clean split birch, on the shelf above the stove a lamp wearing a paper bag over its chimney, survivor of the past, kept for hours when thunder storms threatened the less reliable electric lights. He was

ten, with his chin buttoned over a lazy man's load of stove wood, staggering to the wood-box. He was twelve, with his feet puffy and queer-white in a tub of cold water, his mother standing over him with a cup of hot milk and not a word of reproach that he had stayed too long skating, on the ice-pond. No, he was Thomas Hill, college graduate, teacher, about to sail for Europe, how much older, wiser, all that unthinking innocence lost forever.

He closed the door upon the boy, upon the kitchen. The fog had deepened, baffling the light from the windows. In it odors were intensified. Grass. Henry must have mowed the lawn. Earth. He must have plowed the vegetable garden. Thomas's feet found the path in the darkness and he went slowly past the barn, hearing soft animal movements within, thud of hoof, crunching, until he touched the rail fence around the orchard. Although the house rose above the village on its hill, here at the rear there was only orchard, pasture, stretching away to the woods. Finally he felt his way back to the house. Faintly, through the heaviness of sleep, he heard his mother and Laurel come home.

Waking, he had a moment of confusion. Thin pale sunlight lay on the faded matting, on the patchwork quilt. Fog was burning off. A robin talked insistently just outside the window, but the house was quiet. Saturday. That school ma'am would be under foot all day. Presently he stalked through the empty house. Where was everybody? As he opened the front door his mother came toward him, breeze ruffling her hair. "Hello, sleepy-head," she said. She brushed mud from her fingers. "I've got Henry to work on the flower beds at last. He's kept saying it was too early. But when that beech begins to show green, spring is here." Thomas looked up the silver trunk; the pointed bronze buds had started to unfurl. "It's the prettiest green there is. But come in. I'll fix your breakfast."

Thomas sat beside the kitchen table. "Where's your boarder?"

"Laurel? You like your eggs turned, the way you used to? Laurel's gone to the township school. She was supposed to be supervisor, but there wasn't money enough. So she

hires out to teach our school, and does the other work without pay on Saturday."

"I'm glad she's gone. It's queer, having a stranger around."

His mother set down his plate on the white oilcloth, and drew up her chair. "You seem almost a stranger yourself," she said, "you've been gone so much. I wish you had longer to stay now. I know it's a grand chance for you."

"Say, this is a grand breakfast!" Thomas sidetracked her, telling about the cafeteria, gray coffee, eggs her hens wouldn't own as eggs. Mrs. Hill didn't see how people stood it, never having real food. Then as Thomas went on to talk about his class, he saw her stop listening, her mouth pursed over some hidden thought. He was silent several moments before she spoke.

"Your father always hoped you might come back here once you were through school," she said. "You think you want to be a teacher?"

"What difference does it make what I do?" His anger was the inarticulate cry of his confusion. The world these older people had made, had known, was ended, and yet the standards which had served them still cluttered up his feelings. They expected him to settle down, as they said, to have a career, to be a stable citizen. What did they know of the fear that the unknown future would only destroy any accomplishment of his? "What would I do here?" His mother scarcely heard him. She was listening to things said by his father.

"Your father found plenty to do. If I didn't know you have your own pride in yourself, I'd be more worried about some of your wild talk."

"Pride!" Thomas rumpled his hair. "What good's pride if there's a revolution? You don't understand—"

"I guess I don't and so it don't worry me." Her blue eyes studied him a moment. "But some things near at hand do. The mill buildings and the taxes. We can't sell it. Lawyer Snow has tried. Taxes are up again this year." She rubbed at a brownish spot on the oilcloth. "Mr. Snow says to tear it down, wreck it. We'd save over a thousand a year."

Thomas hitched back in his chair. Sentiment again! He'd

been fighting the mill all his life. "Why should any one buy it? Old fashioned little plant. A man can't do anything with a private business. They've been destroyed by capitalism." His mind veered, hunting among tags of phrases for one final, emphatic. "We've got to scrap everything, give the common man a chance. Why, if I tried to run the mill, I'd be a capitalist!" But how impress a woman who didn't even hear him? His mother gave herself a little shake inside her crisp blue gingham and reached for his emptied dishes.

"He made such good blankets," she said, as she rose. "I hear Dodge is letting all his sheep go this year. Well, I couldn't order the plant torn down without speaking to you." For a moment her face had a grayish cast, as if dust of demolished looms and dyeing vats settled over her. "We'll say no more about it." She stepped briskly to the sink. "Would you like gingerbread this noon?" At the nape of her neck fine hair curled tight from the fog; her back was straight. She was disappointed. She understood only that he refused to step into his father's discarded boots.

"I thought we might go out to your grandfather's place this afternoon. The lilacs are always earliest there. I'd like some for Memorial Day."

"Fine," said Thomas. Another trick to soften him? A drive to those abandoned acres had been a favorite expedition when he was a little boy. His grandfather Hill had moved into the village, had built this very house, had founded the mill more than half a century ago. Thomas jumped to his feet. "Guess I'll take a turn around town," he said. "See some old familiar faces."

"You might stop at Snow's office." His mother glanced around. "He wants you to sign for some bank stock. They're settling for part of the deposits that way. You'll be twenty-five this fall."

"And give him a chance to work on me, too?"

Mrs. Hill made a quick rush at her son. "What you scared of?" she asked, laughter crinkling her eyes. "That's a nice tie." She laid a finger on the knot. "Makes your eyes blue as anything. Makes you look like my father. He was an Irish hot-head, too. There's something I want you to do,

while you're on the other side. He always wanted to go back to Ireland, to the place he came from. He never could. You're the first to go. I've written it down, what he told me, and I'd like you to visit it. I doubt that you'd find any relations."

"I have to go with the family that's hiring me." Thomas wriggled under her hands. "I can't go traveling about."

"It wouldn't be far, across to Ireland. I'll give you the money. Since he couldn't go, and I can't, I'm asking it of you." And I don't ask much, was implicit in the steady look she gave him. "You can manage it if you want to. Now run along and show yourself off to the town, or I won't have my baking done." She patted his shoulder and whirled about toward the cupboards.

"But what good would it do you—or him?" Thomas protested. Ireland! He could see himself swept on a footless errand toward a green speck on a map.

"I don't know!" Flour flew up in a cloud from the sifter. "I know I want it so much there must be a reason, do I know it or not."

Thomas shrugged and went to look for a cap. When she got that look in her eye, you could save your breath. His father had had stories about her rare stubborn fits. Like the time she'd made Henry harness up and start out in a blizzard, to find his father pinned under the sleigh, leg broken.

When they started on the afternoon expedition, the school teacher sat on the rear seat of the Ford. Thomas, hunting for a pair of old shoes in the loft, had heard her come in, had heard her set up a lively conversation with his mother. Her voice was not like a kitten, he thought; more like barn swallows, or a brook, on and on. She stopped abruptly when she saw him.

"I was telling Laurel she must come with us," said his mother. What could he say but, "Certainly," and, "there's plenty of room."

Thomas felt her, demure and critical, behind him as he drove. The old car took plenty of humoring. "It's like the first real spring day!" His mother had to shout at him. She

perched alertly beside him, eager for signs of spring activity in fields and gardens. "Here we are! You can't drive in."

You certainly couldn't. His feet sank into the moss, there was no firmness in this ground unlocked from winter. Laurel passed him, sure-footed and swift at the edge of the lane. Thomas held aside branches for his mother and then dropped behind her. The sunlight was brilliant on innumerable bits of color; later they would merge into the mass of summer; now each separate leaf or key or blossom kept its identity of shape and hue, tips of spruce and balsam, pale birch leaves, unfurling beech. That girl's head was the color of closed beech buds. She walked like a conceited piece, never turning her head, hands tucked into pockets of the streaked brown jacket belted snugly about her round waist, the movement of her body effortless and quiet. He'd like to startle her just once out of her smug hostility. He stubbed against a boulder. His mother glanced back, waited for him.

"Did I ever tell you about the first time I came here?" The lane, climbing steadily, had grown drier, and they could walk side by side. "Your father brought me one Sunday. He had a black mare named Nellie and a new top-buggy." Her eyes were droll and young. "I don't mind telling you I was pretty worried. In two weeks I had to go back to Boston with the family I was working for, and say a word he wouldn't. I thought maybe his folks had persuaded him—" Thomas dragged back; he didn't want that girl overhearing family annals. "There I was, a stranger, just an Irish working girl. My father had his own nursery, but there'd been one of these spells folks call hard times, so I hired out. And the Hills were the biggest people in the county." She laughed. "A thunderstorm came up, and the mare was frightened. Your father had to get out and hold her head. I thought I might be as smart as the mare. So I cried and took on a little. It worked fine." Her mouth curved, remembering. "Only it was a nuisance, later, to act scared when it thundered."

"Oh, you women!" But Thomas could not imagine his father and mother as young and separate, needing to come together out of separate lives.

"I didn't go back to Boston. That's why I like to come here." She gave herself a little shake, coming briskly again to the present, brushing away shad-flies that teased at the edges of her hair.

The wood ended suddenly, and the road led, old cart tracks like paired shadows, up a cleared hillside tawny with matted blueberry growth. The low plants were heavy with clustered ivory-pink bells; the hum of bees was like the small, secret chiming of the bells. In the distance, at the crest of the hill, was the dark mass of lilacs which his mother sought. Well ahead of them moved the girl, self-absorbed, not turning even to watch the distant view swim into sight, calm curves of blue mountains, silver of water. The house had been gone for half a century, but the granite blocks of the foundation still guarded the cellar hole, holding back the encroachment of earth gone wild again, and the door-yard lilacs had spread to the line of the foundation. The lilac buds were deep purple arrow heads. "They'll open in water," said Mrs. Hill.

"This," came Laurel's soft voice, "must have been the doorstep." She was kneeling, parting the long grass, the longer blades of lilies. "See?" She stopped, seeing that Thomas stood near her, and Mrs. Hill had vanished beyond the lilacs. But she sat down on the stone, her hands curled together.

"They lived a long way from every one, those old fellows, didn't they?" He'd see if he could make her talk. Minx.

"Ye-us." She drawled it. Her smooth, secret face hid her thoughts.

"No telephone, no movies, no cars, penned up here all winter." Thomas spoiled his climax by slapping at flies. "What a life!" Her skin was like the blossom of the blueberry, that cool, flushed cream.

"Like an island," she said, slowly. "Men don't live on islands any more."

"Well, I should hope not. Except Manhattan. That's an island." Thomas was pleased with his own cleverness. But Laurel shook her head.

"I mean they used to make their own lives. Now the

land is still here, as it used to be—" she pushed her fingers through the grass—"fields and trees and rivers—"

"Men lived in caves, once. They can't go back to that."

"But I can't understand. It isn't as if we'd had famines and plagues, and yet people are so poor. The school where I went this morning has to close. In this town nobody has any money. They can't pay the grocer, their taxes. Your mother says they've always been so proud nobody was on the town, and now—"

Thomas could explain. The collapse of the whole rotten system. Phrases rolled out, with more ardor than coherence; he waved his arms. But when he paused, impressively, the girl said, "It's easier to talk than to do things."

"Me? What could I do?"

"I don't know. There's the mill. Folks were comfortable when that ran."

Thomas flung up his arms, his nerves jumped. "You think I ought to stay here, too! Like old Snow, prating about my duty. To the town, to the country! If the town needs a mill, why doesn't it get one?" (This morning Snow had said: They'd all work in one quick enough, but there's got to be somebody to run it, somebody smart and interested.) "Fossilized old busybody! The country's ruined and you don't know it. Settle down like my grandfather, revert a hundred years. Is that what you expect?"

"My goodness!" Laurel tipped back her head, sunlight like amber in her widened eyes. "I don't expect anything." She stopped as Mrs. Hill scrambled into sight, her arms full of purple-tipped branches.

"What you hollering about, Thomas?" Her glance had tolerance for his male folly of such words under the spring sun; it had pride for his spare, young body, taut and alive, no matter what alien excitement fired him. "I could hear you clear through the lilacs." She thrust the branches at him. "You carry them. I want to pick cedar on the way back."

No use trying to explain. He'd be gone in a day or so. He strode ahead of them. She hadn't been expecting anything! His rage was in his muscles now, propelling him

down the slope, into the woods. He was in flight from the past, from entrapping sentiment, from a girl cool and cream-pink as a blossom and just as impervious to him. To be sure, the flight had to end at the Ford. He couldn't drive away. When his mother and the girl came through the wood, he sat in dignity behind the wheel. He heard the girl's voice, lightened in amusement, and his mother's laughter. Again the girl turned him into an intruder, so instantly was she silent. The cool spice of broken cedar entered the car with them—(extra blankets the first cold nights of fall, smelling of cedar from the old chests.) "I do like a walk when I get what I go for," said Mrs. Hill. "My, your feet are muddy. I guess you didn't look where you were going!"

The noise of the old car, at the rate Thomas drove it home, was talk enough. His mother's shoulder brushed his. Thomas moved, pressing his arm against hers. He didn't know why he'd felt so edgewise. She wasn't trying to hold him here, for all he knew so well what she would like. You couldn't blame her: this was her life, with blueberry pastures and a memory of a thunderstorm. He'd be careful what he said the short time he had left. After all, women never cared about a man's ideas. He'd ask about Ireland, get her interested in the trip. He might even wear down the hostility of this girl on the back seat. By the time he sent the Ford chugging up to the house he was warmed through by his altered mood; he was an actor, planning a fine farewell performance.

When he came down to supper, he found only two places laid. Laurel, said his mother, had gone over to the Grindels'. "She thought we'd rather be alone this last night, and Mark's always after her to do something." Mrs. Hill set the gold-rimmed tureen in front of Thomas. Half his audience gone, but why should he mind? He'd seen Mark that morning at his father's store, thick-shouldered, slow, none too cordial. "I suppose she's planning to settle down here, then," he said, bitterly. Did she talk to Mark, running on in that soft swallow tone?

"You can't tell about Laurel. She's deep." His mother

slipped into her chair. "This is your Sunday dinner, since you have to start so early."

"It's swell." Thomas served, and then, casually, "I don't see why she took such a dislike to me."

"Take more white meat." His mother laughed. "It would be a long time before you'd know what Laurel thought. She's a real down-easter."

After supper they sat for a time on the porch while the long twilight lingered steady and colorless in the west, and suddenly an evening star showed over dark points of trees. His mother talked a little about her people. "I might have learned more about them, but like all young folks I just took them for granted as I knew them. My mother would tell of the dread of rent day every quarter, the pinching to collect the shillings, the walk with her mother, carrying their shoes until they neared the town, to pay the landlord. I don't know just where the farm was. She and my father met in this country." Something crackled in her fingers, she reached toward him. "If that isn't money enough, let me know. I've written down the names of the places." She stood behind him, her fingers touching his hair. "You were a good boy to come home. You don't know when you'll be coming again?"

Thomas moved under her light caress. He didn't want to be got at! "How can I tell? I hope I'll find a position in the fall. If I have more luck than most men—" He broke off; he meant not to explode again, to slide away as gracefully as a dream.

"Well," said his mother, and for an instant he was a child, begging to sit up a little longer, just till the star hit the branch of the spruce, "it's time you were in bed. You have a long trip ahead of you."

Henry, more dour than on Friday, drove Thomas to town for the bus. Mrs. Hill kissed him good-by without a tear, and went into the house without watching him off. Thomas had tried to think of a message for Laurel, one to show that although he observed her rudeness and hostility, he moved in a remote, untouchable orbit. But he couldn't find the phrase. Henry left him at the corner with a final,

"Don't seem worth while to come at all if you can't stop." The street was deserted, this early Sunday morning. Thomas paced back and forth. Something about a visit home—it stripped off the layers of personality you made for yourself, it reduced you to the old picture they all kept of you. It made you feel guilty if you differed from that image. The bus rumbled along the quiet street, and Thomas was alone in a rear seat, suitcase at his feet, his fingers searching out the edge of his passport, the soft leather of his billfold.

The ship sailed at five on Monday. Thomas went aboard early, stiff with determination to act as if he had taken ocean liners every week of his life. For the five days of the journey that determination absorbed much of his energy. As Philip Anderson Senior thought the routine might as well begin at once, he tutored Philip Junior from eleven to one. The task was easier than Thomas had expected. The boy, spectacles and nose prominent in a face thinned by illness, was bent on keeping up with his own class. "I hope you know enough to get me through those exams I had to miss," he said. "My father says you're pretty smart."

"I am," said Thomas, and the boy kept him busy proving it.

Occasionally Thomas met Mr. Anderson pacing off the mile marked on the promenade deck. "How are things going?" The man was pleasant, in an absent-minded fashion. "Fine morning, isn't it?" Mrs. Anderson appeared after luncheon, for a few hours of bridge. Thomas peered into the lounge at cocktail hour, dodging if a waiter looked at him. From his seat in the dining room he could see the Andersons, and scowl at the obsequiousness of the stewards. In the evening he listened from a doorway to the orchestra, and then climbed to the boat-deck to watch the dark, moving water, and to assure himself that he wasn't impressed by this show of luxury, evening dress, jewels, music, strange food; that it was a wanton display of wealth while people starved. Then, it being the last day, he wondered how much he ought to tip the stewards. He'd heard they all lined up—

Six weeks later Thomas was again on ship-board, this time on a small boat with a stuffy cabin amid-ships and open

decks blown across by a cold drizzle, out of Glasgow for Belfast. He had three days for himself. There had been a month in London at the most American hotel Mrs. Anderson could find, a month for Mr. Anderson's affairs with the branch office (three days would have done at home, he complained) for Mrs. Anderson's shopping and search for a satisfactory hair-dresser, for Thomas's practice in driving to the left. Thomas and the boy went sight-seeing: English history where it happened, a nightingale still singing in a mulberry tree outside Keats' house, fog from the Thames floating under the arches of the great hall at Parliament. Thomas wrote to his mother, "The funny thing is running into the past everywhere you turn, not just old buildings and Roman Walls, but the way people do things." He held his pen motionless so long it made a blob of ink. He drew a circle around it, and wrote, "Tear shed for U. S. A."

He had driven the family north, with Philip yawning at his mother's citations from the guide-book, especially those concerning ruined abbeys and cathedrals. Now he had left them at Edinburgh. Mrs. Anderson didn't care to motor around lochs in a Scotch mizzle, and as long as Mr. Hill returned in time to drive them to Southampton for the sailing date—

The North Channel increased Thomas's wonder that he had yielded to his mother's demand for this sentimental journey. Pale, his firmly closed lips blue, he stood near the bow as the boat edged into the Belfast docks. The ground moved beneath his feet, and the cab lurched past blocks of blank, low buildings. If the memory of the sea had been less vivid in his interior, he might have turned back to the night boat for Glasgow.

But he slept heavily, and in the morning bacon and eggs had a good taste. Buttoning his raincoat close to his chin he set out for the hour before train time. It was an ugly town, forlorn and dingy in the rain, with men huddled silent in doorways. Rain streaked the shop-windows, obscuring the goods. Thomas turned back toward the station, hands in his pockets, a scowl between his blue eyes. He stood at a corner a moment, watching a trolley car crawl past, the

motorman clanging his gong at a cart piled high with gaping bags of rags, drawn by an old horse, his head nodding slowly to his knees as he plodded. At the curb a woman waited, shapeless, wrapped in a torn shawl, face like a toothless rodent, and beside her a small creature, a child with naked bowed legs under a wet rag of a garment. As Thomas looked the child waddled to the stream flowing along the gutter and bent, clutching at something floating. The wet rag drooped forward, and Thomas stared at pinched, pointed, gray buttocks, with a purple bruise. The woman yanked at an arm and dragged it off, puppet-dangling, but the free hand pushed something into its mouth.

Thomas strode toward the railroad, but he couldn't push that image out of his vision. Even after the train had started and he sat at the window, shut alone into the small, musty compartment, he still saw it. There are things just as bad in America, he thought. Children starve there. But that dreadful rear! Like something doomed. He turned to the window, he watched the slow wheeling of the country. Hedges, low green fields, white cottages with tumbled chimneys, broken roofs, rolled to the window and away. He saw a small flag high in an isolated tree, and then the train halted for custom officers. He tried to remember what he had read of the Revolution. Not much. He would have fought in it, had he been here. He came to Killard at noon, with several hours before the return train. The two custom officers climbed from the train and without a glance at Thomas vanished into one of the low sheds. There seemed no town, nothing but tracks and sheds in the middle of green and foggy land. Behind the station in a dirt road leaned an ancient car, the frame nailed together with slats, rope wound about the hood, and in it the owner, asleep, knees crooked on the rear seat.

"Can you tell me," said Thomas, loudly, "where Killard is?"

"Is it lost, now?" The man gaped, upended his body. "Killard, is it?" He leaped out of the car to rattle at the crank. For five shillings he would drive Thomas to Killard. For ten he would show him the town. When Thomas

asked how far it was, he came down to seven, and he would bring him anywhere at all, even back here well in time for the train. Thomas got in and clung to a slat.

"Some of my people came from here," began Thomas. "Do you know any one by the name of Sullivan?"

The driver knew him well. A fine lad. "I knew you'd a look of the Sullivans."

"How could you know him?" A stump of tooth showed in the man's grin. "He was my grandfather. He's dead."

"Your grand-da, eh? A great loss, then, and I didn't know him." There was, now he thought it over, not a Sullivan in Killard. Nor little else. Along the margin of the mud-flats in the small harbor stood a row of white-washed cottages, thatched roofs sagging, chickens pecking in door-yards, on the banks weathered bones of small fishing boats. Twice they drove the length of that road, and then took another, past a gaunt red brick structure, with not a pane of glass left, with rank weeds up to the walls. Once the fishing had been good, the linen woven there the best in the world. But the flax had come from the North and could come no more, what with the excise, the young men all had gone to make their fortunes. There was change in the world, the taxes went now to Dublin, and God be praised they spoke of good times to come. But potatoes and a bit of pork were as hard to come by and as sweet in the belly as in his grand-da's time. The driver stopped, the engine gasping. "And that," he said, "is Killard. If it's more you would see, name it."

Thomas unfolded his legs gingerly and stepped out of the car. "I'll walk back." He fingered through his silver and then thrust a ten shilling note at the man. Vociferous blessings followed him down the narrow road.

A donkey winked its rain-sleek ears solemnly at him. He overtook and passed a covey of human beings, the man ahead, lean, bearded, swishing at wet grass with a freshly peeled stick; behind him the woman, skirt drabbled, back bent as she pushed a creaking baby carriage piled with ragged quilts and rusty pans; behind her the children, the smallest whimpering and pulling at her skirt. Neither the

man nor the woman looked at him as he passed; the children nibbled at him with ancient, furtive eyes.

She looked too old to have given birth to them. Thomas thrust back his head, the mist cold on his eyelids. Somewhere in Ireland must be beauty, fire, genius. He had no time to find it. If Thomas Sullivan had stayed here, in Killard, he thought, would I now be creeping between hedgerows? But he hadn't stayed. He had gone—and suddenly a phrase Thomas had known too long to understand unfolded its dull husk and he caught a flicker of its meaning to men—he had gone to *a new country*. He might have walked this very road, pack over his shoulder, beginning his tramp to Cobh, where he would board a vessel. Thomas pushed his lips out in a fierce grimace. His grandfather had thought he'd find streets paved with gold and every man as good as a king, hadn't he? And what had he found? Well, what? Thomas came to the sheds along the track, with an hour yet before the train. He dragged a packing box to a wall and sat down. He was cold and hungry, and he had a feeling somewhere in his guts that was neither of those, but worse. I wouldn't be here if he had stayed, he told himself. I'm part Hill. And then, with that foreshortening of time he had felt so steadily, he saw the first Hill plodding away from an English village, yesterday, the day before. His eyes closed, he was suspended, light and small, above a globe which turned slowly into the sun, and up over the rounded surface crawled small figures, ant-like, crawling westward. For the first time in his life he felt the land toward which they moved; he felt it whole, the earth, stretched wide under changing skies, varied, capricious, secret in its promise, expectant and yielding. He was small and humble, feeling it thus whole. He tried to muster his agile, brittle thoughts against this feeling. He had always known that America had been settled by men from many lands. Why now should a sudden passion twist at his loins, beat in his temples? Was it homesickness? Or sadness that the hope, the courage with which these men and women had set forth had so failed? Common people, going down to the shores of old lands to start on a strange voyage.

Thomas sat with every muscle taut, eyelids, ears, mouth sealed, as if by pressure he could extract some meaning that seemed to tremble all about him in the silent place. The whistle of the train assaulted his rigid waiting. Unsteadily he got to his feet. He had almost had his mind's finger on the meaning he sought.

The intensity of his feeling had faded by the time he reached Edinburgh again. He stowed luggage in the car and drove to Cook's for mail forwarded from London. Standing outside the door, where the Andersons were to meet him, he read a month-old letter from his mother. She didn't have much of interest to write about compared with all he was seeing. The inspectors had condemned most of the blueberries on account of maggots, which was discouraging, but Mark Grindel talked as if the N.R.A. had invented the maggots. Laurel had been visiting her. (That was how his mother had heard Mark talk!) Mr. Snow thought they might sell the machinery and so she hadn't had the buildings torn down yet. Laurel had an offer from a school near Portland but she hadn't made up her mind. She was well and hoped he was the same, with love.

Above the city rose the russet-rocky hills, the gray castle, but Thomas, pocketing the letter, saw a girl sitting on a granite slab. He had delivered a regular oration to Laurel, hadn't he? His ears burned. "It's easier to talk than to do things," she had said. He had been so sure he knew what was wrong, and now his phrases had a tinny sound. They had been coined in lands where lords lived in moated castles, and now, even here, grass grew in the moat and the castle crumbled. Thomas blew out his lips in an attempt at his old bluster. "I don't know what's happened to me, what I believe."

But the Andersons were assembling, Mr. Anderson thumbing over his mail, Mrs. Anderson dangling last minute purchases, Philip shouting, "Say, Hill, where'd you park the bus?"

"Yes, we must get started." Mrs. Anderson might have been waiting for hours. "We haven't allowed too much time to reach Southampton."

The homeward voyage dragged. The passengers had spent their money, finished their holidays, exhausted their hope for adventure. In imagination they were already at home. A spell of thick weather as the ship neared the Banks wiped half the passengers from sight. Thomas and Philip had their choice of undisturbed corners for the final reviews. Thomas tried to tie up history with the sightseeing. "He was imprisoned in the Tower. Remember?"

"Sure." Philip slashed a fist through the air. "Whifpt! Off with your head. Say, Tom, could you see blood on that chopping block?"

The boy was too young to find reality outside his own experience. Time for him had to be to-day, with just a glimmer of to-morrow. Well, thought Thomas, soberly, I've just begun to grow older myself.

The early morning when the ship docked, moving slowly up the river and in beside the pier, as slowly as if the city heat pressed on bow and cabins more resistant than the tide, Thomas stood with Mr. Anderson at the rail. Mr. Anderson had been enthusiastically spotting towers. "Doesn't look as if we needed to despair, does it?" His enthusiasm rippled wider, to include Thomas. "Been a good thing for you, this trip. What you planning to do?"

Thomas didn't know. Even no longer ago than the day his grandfather had heard the anchor chain run out, across on the Jersey shore, even then this city had not stood thus shining and deep-shadowed in the morning light. And when the first Hills had landed—why, the oldest thing there dated from yesterday! It was nothing but the beginning. "I haven't a job," he said. And these other men, in years past, what jobs had they? "Not yet."

"Why not try business?" Mr. Anderson's delight at homecoming made him expansive. "Look me up at the office. Yes, Mary?" Mrs. Anderson was plucking at his arm. "Yes, I'll help with the bags."

Thomas, alone, listened to the creak of winches, to shouts, sniffed at the river smell, and thought: look you up, yeuh, and find you've forgotten my name. The gangplank slid out, and he went below for his few belongings. As he

picked up the suitcase he knew suddenly what he would do, once his feet were off the boat. He would go home. He hadn't planned it, but his decision was there, like an order. Take a train. Surprise them.

At noon the next day he rode into the village on the mail truck. The driver flopped limp sacks to the ground. "Gor, ain't it hot!" Thomas nodded to the chunky postmistress. The mail was early and only a few children had collected, curling bare toes in the dust. It was hot. Air shimmered over roofs, light glanced off white paint, the leaves of trees stood motionless, glazed to a monotone of green. There was no other place, he thought, where spring, late-coming, burned so quickly into summer, where summer burned out into early frost. Only winter moved with deliberate tread across the hills. He walked slowly at the roadside, the sun a weight on his shoulders.

He passed the general store, heard voices from the dim interior. The double doors of the carpenter shop next hung open, the saws, the planes quiet. The palms of his hands prickled, as if he grasped a nettling thought. These people were all of them dependent upon each other. Cogs in a huge machine, turning when power flowed from its dynamos. His feet made a muffled sound as he struck the small bridge. He looked down at the water, shallow now, golden-brown from its wooded upland sources. This, he thought strongly, is America. Small places like this, others grown large, but separate men and women, common people. Revolution? We had it, when men dared to imagine this country, sailed westward to build it.

What if they had hit a wilderness worse than that of woods and wild land which the first comers found? There could be roads blazed through. Thomas stared across the river, blood pounding in his temples. Common people? Uncommon! Tenacious, unafraid. He stared at the white office building, the low gray stretch of the mill. He remembered the factory at Killard, with rank weeds growing across rotted thresholds. Maybe I'm wrong, stirred up for no reason, he thought. But how's anything to get started unless— Down the street with dust smoking out behind came

the Ford, straight to the office door; out stepped Henry, hitching up his overalls, and after him a girl in a yellow dress, her brown head bent as if heat-wilted. Henry unbarred the door.

What had she and Henry to do with that office? He had not thought of her as quite so small and rounded. He stomped across the bridge and up the wooden platform. The interior was dim, shot across with thin planes of sunlight from cracks in the boarded windows, planes in which dust danced, there was a smell of mice and old wood, the girl Laurel sat in front of the old roll-top desk, and Henry knelt crookedly before the iron box of a safe.

Henry saw him first. "Eh, it's you, is it?" was all he said. Laurel swung the creaking pivot chair around and said nothing.

"Might I ask—" Thomas ran his tongue over his lips—"what you think you're doing?"

"Ask and be damned," said Henry. "With your Ma sick and the wreckers due to-morrow, and me with the east meadow down and should be there—"

Laurel stood, bare arms tight to her sides, her face a secret in pale gold. "You can go through this desk yourself," she said. "Papers, or books, your mother didn't know—"

"What's wrong with my mother?"

"Headache." Laurel did not look at him. "Heat, she said. It might be the wreckers, to-morrow."

Thomas made an arrogant rush past her, slammed down the cover of the desk. "That can wait," he said. "So can the wreckers." His jaw trembled, his fists were tight. Henry upfolded his long joints and squinted.

"Ain't going to open up, are you?" He nodded. "I allus said, give him time, he might come to his senses. I'll get back to my hay." He hitched at his overalls and clumped out of the room.

"Well?" Thomas frowned, he twisted his shoulders back. "Why don't you say something?"

"What should I say?"

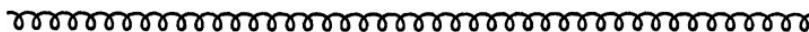
Was she laughing at him, under those drooping lids, be-

hind that sober mouth? A shaft of sunlight lay across one arm, just where the soft curve narrowed into the hollow of the elbow; her hand touched the worn leather of the chair beside her, and under the warm tan of her flesh ran a slight tremor.

"Do you understand? I'm coming back here, to stay. I'm going to open these mills. I get my money this fall. I'll ruin myself, without a doubt. But—" He couldn't explain to her. She was too shut within herself.

She drew a quick sigh and looked at him, her eyes lighted amber. "I thought for so long if only you would want to do that," she said.

"Are you going to be here this winter?" Thomas asked, abruptly. She nodded, and for an instant something swift-flying and lovely peered out of ambush, then in a breath had gone again. "All right. Come along, then. Let's go home."



WORLD'S WILDFIRE

"**T**HERE, that's the road." Carol West looked at it. "You better not drive in," she told the young man in grease-splotched overalls. "It's hard to turn at the garage when it's icy."

"I'd just as lief tackle it."

But Carol unlatched the sedan door and stepped out. "And you'll bring my car the minute it's done? You can't 'phone. It's disconnected."

"Okey. If Mac gets that part, it won't take long."

She stood a moment to watch him maneuver a turn where the private road angled from the main road. Then, head thrust well back against the soft fur collar, shoulders stiffened against her reluctance, she marched herself along the edge of the drive, where contracting snow left bare gravel. Black rocks on the hillside shone seal-wet under the bright March sun, the old stone wall along the top of the hill held the straight thin trees from filing off into the intense blue of the sky. Her heart had quieted a little, but her nerves were still knotty. Bad enough to have to agree to this meeting, without losing the composure she had planned. If she hadn't been already too tense, the accident couldn't have shaken her so demoralizingly. Nothing had happened, except a bent steering rod. A truck, bolting into the highway just beyond a blind underpass, ice in the shadow of the bridge. Now Kimberley would be in a state, because

she was late. He'd take it as a personal affront. She couldn't come, could she, before the wrecking car arrived, and a man from the garage to drive her here? But try explaining anything to Kimberley! He retreated into an ice-sullen mood through which words, no matter how reasonable, could not penetrate. She remembered one of those moods, during the last awful weeks before Kimberley had gone, a mood which had sealed him in for days; it had started because she had been late one evening—what had delayed her? A chance at some interview?—when Kim had planned something. She shivered, feeling the weight of that mood. She wouldn't think about it! For more than a year now she had practiced not thinking about Kim. Except to point out to herself occasionally how much more time and energy she had, released from the constant strain of walking the tight-rope Kim's personality stretched for her.

She had come to the stone garage, and paused there, not yet looking up at the house on the ledge above. She hadn't wished to come out here to-day. But if Kim thought it necessary for the two of them to go over the contents of the house before selling, then come she would. "I should like to dispose of the house," he had written. His only letter since he had gone! "Since we shall never need it again, and I can make use of the money. I'll meet you there any Saturday you set." Never had she given Kim a chance to complain that she was unfair about his suggestions. Only once had she really differed with him, and then his suggestion had been negative, passive, an "I suppose you wouldn't consider—" She lifted her head for a defiant look at the house, shingled, gabled, like a bird-house on the black ledge. "Consider holing in for a while in the house. It would cost so little. Just till I get on my feet again." She'd been considerate, not laughing at him. "I could support us both there," he'd gone on, and then suddenly shrunk inside himself, with one of his dismaying recoils from a word as yet unspoken.

"But Kim, darling! How reckless! When my job's getting good, and I have to be on the spot to do it. What's mine is yours, you know."

They hadn't been near the house that last distressing winter. She had been busy, rushing about after celebrities, infant prodigies, opera stars, imported novelties, meeting them at cocktail parties, at first nights, at docking liners, in Brooklyn flats. She had grown ill at ease when rarely she was alone with Kim, needing the presence of others to fill the emptiness he created around him. He had fallen into an abyss so deep that the rush of his falling threatened to suck her down, too.

She laid a hand on the chestnut railing and started to climb the stone steps. The railing was warm through her glove, she stepped gingerly through slush and mud until she reached the bend; there, under the full sun, the stones had dried. Amazing how warm the day had turned. Winter last night in town, with side streets still ice-coated from the storm early in the week, and suddenly, unbelievably, this warmth to-day. At the top step, between the two round cedars, she stopped. (Only strong hearts can live in our house, Kim used to say.) She would not remember him squatting there under another spring sun, triumphant over the flat rock he had brought from the hillside for the top step. Her heart was strong enough. Just a hangover from that accident, the way it raced.

The blue shutters were fast against the outer world. Kim might have opened them. Did he stand behind one of them now, lowering at her with that set, white look? She moved with casual dignity across the flagged terrace and laid her hand on the door. Locked. She let the knocker fall and heard its sound die in emptiness. She opened her handbag and pushed her fingers through its contents. Then she shrugged. She had left her keys in the car. And Kimberley was late, not she. Relief set her heart pounding again, relief at this postponement. She'd find a dry spot somewhere to sit, and pull herself together.

She climbed a path which led to the hill above the plateau on which the house stood. No sense in feeling sentimental, even if the forsythia did strike out its brownish arrows already beaded for blossoms. Then she heard the brook, soft under winter leaves, silver-loud against stone. She went

sliding down the slope, feet slipping in mud, bringing up against a tree, breathless. She chose a flat rock, dry enough, and sat there, throwing back her coat. "He needn't have acted the way he did!" she cried out, gathering up resentment against the sound of the brook, the warmth of the sun. Of course it had been hard for him, losing his position. But she'd always thought he saw more clearly than most men. They were all alike, unable to endure it if they weren't in every way superior to their women. He had seemed so proud of her at first. Boasting about her cleverness, her success. Only as long as he knew he was on top! He'd been responsible for her ever getting into the work; he'd liked those first silly things she'd tried to write. (Why, the girl's good! Keep at it, Carol!) He had managed the first introduction to an editor. Centuries ago, the gay first year of their marriage. His confidence had been a stronger force than any inner drive, winging her past blunders, discouragement, naïve dismay at rivalries and trickery. How had he changed so? Like the slow creep of a disease, working out from secret centers. She had pretended not to notice, thinking, it's only that he's wretched about his own work. "We're luckier than most," she had said. "*We are?*" he had asked, and under his dark eyes a faint twitching started. Perhaps she had begun to drive herself harder, as if she felt too many desperate fingers scrabbling for her job, and she had to run to keep it from their clutch. It hadn't been easy, coming home to Kim's hostility, trying to fold it under an assumed and brittle pleasantness. Toward the last, before Kim had gone, she not only had ceased to tell him what she was doing, whom she was meeting, but she was hiding from him anything which marked a small triumph. She hadn't known until after he had gone that the last of his money, a loan on insurance, had been tied up in that bank failure. But even so, what falseness of pride not to allow her to help!

Ah, this was exactly what she had dreaded, this weaving back through unhappiness! She had escaped it all the year, hardly, by packing the days so full not a crack was left for thought. But here it ran with the brook, it gleamed

on the smooth slim trunks of beeches, it lay in the dark shadow stroke each tall thin tree let fall. Carol loosened her coat and slipped it back in a heap about her, she tossed aside her hat and watched it roll into a pocket made by tree roots, filled with rusty gray leaves. The sun was warm on her neck, through her hair. She would be quiet as a tree, as a rock. She wound her arms about her knees, arching her thin body, the brown knitted frock sheath-snug over the flat, narrow back, the slight arms. Her posture was restlessness caught for a moment into stillness. Her face had hints of restiveness about the mouth, the full lips compressed too firmly, about the eyes, in the high arch of the lids. She dropped her head forward to her knees, feathers of brown hair drifting to conceal her face, the sun sliding over the narrow stem of her neck. How still it was! Only the sound of the brook, a sound of cool consonants, l-p, l-p. The warmth of the sun enclosed her, it pressed against her shoulders, it moved fingers down her arms; she had forgotten how different sun warmth felt from fire, from heat. She was transparent, shone-through, her bones shone sun-glossed, sun-bursts ran in her blood. She lifted her head slowly, turning to feel sun on her eyelids.

In the motionless air earth-odors rose softly, leaf-mold, damp pungency. The stillness had expectancy, not emptiness, as if everything about her listened. This, thought Carol, is the very hour when spring begins. If she could listen intently enough, she'd hear the moment it came over the hill. This was the way sun felt in the earth itself. She was nothing but part of the earth, bound darkly to the rhythm of its seasons. The texture of her life as she had made it, with its brittle, crowded hours, crumbled into dust, blew away.

She opened her eyes and stared at a world blanched after the strong light on her lids, earth and stones and trees strange without color. Her hands, open on her knees, were pallid, and her body ached deeply, as if the sun had stirred it into secret, separate life her mind could not touch. She pushed herself to her feet, in quick, angry movement. "You

would go sentimental about spring," she said. "You always were!" She shook out her coat, retrieved her hat, watched how the yellow tone flowed back into the landscape, warming the dead leaves, the patches of ferns. If Kim didn't come soon, she'd walk to the village, wait there for her car. She wouldn't stay here to make a sentimental fool of herself.

As she started crisply along the path to the house, she heard a sound, a rustle in leaves, a falling stone, and looking up, she saw Kimberley swinging one leg over the wall at the crest of the hill. He came slowly toward her with a soft, awkward gait. He moved always as if he wore his body loosely, too intent on his thoughts to notice what he did with hands or feet. Carol braced herself against his coming, her hands clenched. She would be quiet and dignified, not showing her resentment. He looked thinner, the lines past the corners of his mouth had deepened, his heavy brows met over his dark, withheld gaze. "Hello," he said. "Been here long? You weren't here when I came, and so—"

"I'm sorry to be late. I had a slight smash which held me up." Anger curled in her. After a year and more he could stand there, cool, indifferent, hands clasped over the knotty end of a stick he had picked up. After all she had done, had tried to do to save them!

"You weren't hurt?" Casually. "I had forgotten you might be driving."

He meant that he had no car. Carol set teeth into her lower lip. What had she expected, that he would be repentant, humble? The sunlight on his dark hair, on the harsh line of his jaw, no longer warmed her. The day had changed because he was alien to it. "Let's get it over with," she said, sharply, "whatever there is to do." She stepped past him to the flagged terrace.

"You have important engagements, perhaps." The words held an old and mocking taunt, but he had spoken them gently, and his eyes looked at her with curiosity.

"No." What did he expect to see, peering at her that way? "But I'd like to be done with it. It's not a pleasant job."

Kimberley leaned his stick against the shingles of the house. "I didn't suppose you'd mind. Well, unlock the door. If I'd had a key, I might have aired things out a bit."

Carol struck her hands together, shreds of the varied emotions of the morning flying to cling to the key as center of all irritation. "No key? Good Lord, Kimberley, didn't you ask me to meet you—"

"But I haven't any." He looked at her, and for the first time he smiled, a droll smile which made him briefly young again. "You had forgotten my gesture of idiocy? I thought you'd have your key."

She remembered. The last week-end they had spent in the house. Kim had been offish because she had an article to finish. Sunday a car-load of friends, new friends of hers, had driven out, and she had, of course, laid aside her work to entertain them. Chester Rorke, whom Kim hated. Several others. When at last they had gone, she had said, pleasantly enough, that she would shut herself in the guest room, as she'd have to work half the night. Kim had been sullen-silent during their hasty breakfast, and as they hurried down the hill to catch an early train to town, he had stopped and with a violent swoop of his arm, had flung something into the wood. "This is the last damned day I spend in that house," he had said, "being bar-tender to that bunch of dopes, and nothing, not even that, to you."

"So that was what you threw away," said Carol. "Well, I left mine in the car, in the key case with the rest. And the car's at Mac's garage."

Kimberley rattled the handle of the door. "I can walk down and get it, I suppose. Two miles to go, two back. That's an hour."

"I don't want to wait here!" Another hour, when those few minutes had all but undone her! "They'll drive the car up when it's done."

"Do we both wait, then?"

"Isn't there some way to get in?"

"Probably not. Wasn't that our idea about these shutters and locks? But I'll look around."

Carol followed him, feet sinking into spongy earth; they

had tried to make grass grow here beneath the living-room windows. The few blades must have died last summer, untended. Winter had been an untidy tenant, a slattern, moving out over night, without notice, leaving débris everywhere, broken branches, dead leaves mounded along the barberry hedge, a grayish film over the floor of the long porch, a scum of brown needles from the hemlocks. Carol sank down on the wide stone step of the porch. "I'll stay here." She heard Kim try the French doors, heard him climb over the railing and drop to the ground. The cellar window rattled. Then he was out of hearing behind the house. No use. The house rejected them; they were intruders. How characteristic of Kim to assume she would have the key, to feel no responsibility! She stared down into scraggly branches of trees which grew at the foot of the ledge; only the hemlocks stood up higher than the house, thrusting pointed branches at the dormer windows. Just below her in the crotch of an ash was an old nest, bleached and unraveled by the winter. Well, you didn't see the bird that built it hanging around with tears in her bright eyes! Everything passes, love wears out. Carol jerked herself upright. She wouldn't go through the house. Kimberley could do as he pleased about it. If you find anything of mine, burn it up, she prepared a farewell speech for him. She would take herself hastily away from this spring-haunted place. She'd call up Chester, tell him she'd changed her mind about dinner. Nice, comfortable person, Chester.

Kimberley rounded the corner, plodded across the sucking ground. "I can't get in," he said. He seated himself on the step below her, and scraped slowly with his stick at the mud which rimmed his shoes. The stick slipped, scratching ineffectively, his hand, long-fingered, knuckles prominent, had no tension in its grasp. Carol frowned back an impulse to protest; what if he did ruin his shoes? She could dispense with irritation at the ineptness of his movements; it no longer mattered to her. She stared at the fine black hairs about the wrist bone, distinct in sunlight. "Your hand is like you," Kim had said,—what years ago!—and suddenly her skin rippled with cold, remembering unbidden the touch

of his fingers. "Quick and nervous and tight shut on what it takes. Mine is like me, dropping things, absent-minded." They had made a little joke of his absent-minded hands. Dear God, how could things alter so? She turned her head, and the nest with its tatters of thread mocked her.

"I've decided to go," she began hurriedly. "I don't want to go inside. I don't care for anything. I'd have no use for it. (Be as wise as the bird!) Just burn up anything you find, you know, papers, or clothes." She leaned forward to rise, and Kim's stick clattered down on the stone.

"I thought—" again his dark eyes had that intent curiosity— "I thought we might have something to say."

"I'd much rather just go." Carol held herself rigid against a whirl of anger. "What is there to say—after what you have done?"

"Plenty," said Kimberley, succinctly.

Carol looked at him, and as she looked, he grew as strange as a man she had never seen. She could not put his features together into a familiar face. When I loved him, she thought, I didn't see eyes, mouth, skin, I saw—what? Now I can't see past one of those things. The sunlight showed variation of tone on his pale face, from umber at the inner eye corners to gray about the nostrils. Was it hatred that showed you thus only the outer shape or color? All about them was the hushed warmth of the day and she was cold with misery. "I didn't wish to come out here to-day," she began, when suddenly her brittle control snapped. She flung herself up to her feet, she cried out, not the calm things she had planned, but words that pushed up without her volition, words that tore at her throat to be out. "How could you act as you have done? Cruel, selfish. Caring for nothing but your silly pride. Those first days, before I knew where you had gone—terrible. Your bag was gone, too. It wasn't an accident. I thought you might have run off with Marcia. But no, she was in town. Then I saw her, and she knew all about you! You had confided in her." Carol backed against the railing, hands out-spread to brace herself. "What had I ever done to deserve such humiliation?" Kimberley sat motionless, his head

turned away. She wanted to scream at him, to beat at him with hard fists, to shatter his stone-silence. "I know it was hard for you, when the magazine folded and you couldn't find another job. But you needn't have turned against me!" Innumerable fragments of scenes whirled in her, crowding toward speech, toward accusation: this, and this, and this you did. "I didn't complain at your moods, your bitterness, the way you resented everything I did, even when I tried to love you—"

Kimberley turned, propping an elbow on the step above, peering at her under heavy brows. "Tried to love me! 'Here, Kim, have a little kiss and run along. Can't you see I'm busy?' I was to wag my tail and wait till you found time for another pat. You didn't complain? You were noble and tolerant, and I—why, I just couldn't take it." His face was harsh, but his tone, curiously, had no anger. "You had me almost convinced of that when I left. Petty, bickering, jealous male. I did tell Marcia I was going. She'd been decent. I didn't think you'd worry and I couldn't stand a scene with you. I was too near the edge." He stretched his legs along the step, drew his fingers reflectively down his cheek.

"I know you were nervous." Carol twisted her hands impatiently. "But you needn't have changed so completely—such antagonism—"

"You don't know what I was. You had changed too much to be able to see."

Carol laughed. "That's right. Blame me!"

"I do blame you, and you won't ever see why, you'll be so busy justifying yourself. I have an advantage over you. I've taken time to think about us. And you've been so sure you knew all the answers you haven't bothered to think. I can see what's happened to you through the year. You're a little harder, brighter, jumpier. And you aren't even curious about what's happened to me."

Carol withdrew along the rail until she reached one of the square pillars; she pressed her shoulders against it, trying to subdue the speeding up of breath, of heart-beat. "That's

scarcely fair! I asked why you went away. If you explained very simply, I might try to understand."

"You see, you're angry already."

"Am I supposed to like what you're saying?" Her voice was too shrill: pull it down, talk more slowly. "Do go on. I'm listening. Where have you been? What have you been doing?"

He sat forward, looping an arm about one drawn-up knee. "I think I'll tell you, whether you care or not. Whether I can make you see— Two people never see eye to eye. They look out, each of them, from a tiny crack in the dungeon each inhabits, and the truth between them is more than the small view each gets."

Exasperation tightened like a rough cord about Carol's throat; her mind ran busily ahead of Kim's slow words, trying to sniff out the accusation he would presently make. If he dwelt in a dungeon, he had built it himself, walling her out.

"I went home for a while, being broke and wretched. I hadn't been back to stay since I went off to college. I couldn't stick it with you any longer. I hadn't a cent, with the bank closing. When I went home that afternoon, you'd had some people in for cocktails. You won't remember, because you must have said something like it often. You didn't hear me. I stood in the hall, hoping to sneak past the door to my room, when I heard Rorke. He was congratulating you for a new trick you'd turned, I caught the word syndicated, and you said, 'Don't mention it to Kim,' in such a bright tone, all bravery and forbearance. Rorke said, 'Ah!' and laughed."

Carol's face flamed; for an instant she heard that interchange almost as Kim must have heard it, implicit with betrayal. "It was only because you were so difficult, so quick to be wounded! I didn't discuss you with Ror—with any one!"

"Rorke seemed to get your point. So did I. Time to clear out, thinks I. If I'm the jealous, puling brat she thinks, time I hanged myself. If I'm not, I may get to be. So I went."

"But I didn't dare tell you what I was doing! You *did* mind—"

"Wait. I'm coming to what I minded. You know, every grown person ought to go home, after he's been away long enough." Kim reached for his stick, rubbed his palm idly over the knobby end. "You don't see it while you're in it, you don't know what your folks are like, you don't know other people to compare them with. They took me in, of course. I could have my old room, stay as long as I liked, take it easy, stop worrying."

Images shifted in Carol's head, driven by restive, probing thought which tried to find, to strengthen the point Kim moved so slowly to attack. Certainly his mother would be on Carol's side. Dr. Mary West was clear-eyed about the difficulties men made for women. That time she had come to New York to deliver a paper before a medical association, the only woman, an authority on original work in gland treatment, she had talked late with Carol. Carol could see her, well-groomed, alert, blue eyes brilliant with the after-excitement of the day, square white hands moving in controlled gestures. "A woman must be twice as clever and work ten times as hard as any man," she had said. When she had gone, Carol had asked Kim, laughing, "How ever did she stop long enough to have you?" and Kim replied, "Just a personal experiment in the effect of child-bearing on endocrine glands."

And Kim's father—Carol's thought hung hawklike, waiting to strike—a gentle, ineffectual musician, who composed program pieces which were seldom played, who gave piano lessons. Ah, she saw it! The little husband of a famous woman—not that Carol was famous yet—Kim, feeling himself a failure, had slumped into his father's attitude. She flung up her head impatiently. If Kim would only finish!

"Too long a yarn?" Carol flushed again. "I can't hurry it. What I'm trying to say needs a build-up. Well, at first I was sort of torpid. My father was working on a symphony, one he's been at for years. Mother had office hours, private patients, hospital hours. I loafed, ate, slept, as dull as if I'd had a long illness. When I thought at all, it was

about things I'd done as a kid, all sorts of things I had forgotten. They seemed to want to be looked at. Then I began to speculate about my father and mother. I had always admired her and been indifferent toward him. He hadn't done much, you see, and she was already a public character. Not much use as a mother, perhaps."

"And you decided she should have stayed home with you!"

"No." Kim considered the taunt for a moment. "No. As a boy, I'd wanted terrifically to do something to impress her, and my schemes never came off, because she was always too absorbed to notice what I was up to. What I wanted now was to understand them, their relation to each other. The house had a chilly emptiness, as if no one lived there, for all the servants, and the patients at the office, and these two. I had always felt that way. My father was silent, indecisive, nothing vital about him except those long, supple hands of his. I never heard them quarrel. One evening father asked me to go to a concert. Amateurs, four young fellows he had interested in chamber music. They played a tone poem of his. As we walked home he talked a little, released by hearing his own music. He had written that when he was young, he couldn't touch it now. 'I should have gone away,' he said. Then a month or so later they dedicated the new city hospital. The Mayor made a speech, chiefly about Dr. Mary West; her distinction had secured the funds, and under her magnificent charge the hospital would be the finest in the land. As Dr. Mary West stepped beside the Mayor on the wooden platform, my father said, 'Ambition is the one emotion Mary permits herself.' And it was true. She wasn't a woman, she was an institution! And I knew that I would not repeat my father's life."

Carol moved slowly toward him, hand sliding along the rail, her face intent with anger. "What has all this to do with us? Because your father has failed, and your mother has not—"

"But he hasn't. He's a better person than she is. Wise, sympathetic. She was ruthless, concentrated on her drive to gain recognition, power, incapable of any other response.

I suppose it grew on her, although I never remember her any other way. What did she give my father that a man needs from a woman? Soil in which some confidence in self can grow? A small, secure place in this chaotic, sometimes appalling world? Not she." Kim leaned back against the stone barrier, his dark face keen in the sunlight. "And you are going the same way. I know the sin against the Holy Ghost, Carol. You're it! You stand there in the shadow, refusing spring, refusing life, you are hard and bitter and eager to defend yourself. It's too bad. You used to be a nice girl. But you couldn't stand it, your trumpery little successes. They went to your head, they burned out your tenderness. I know what I'm saying! It's bad enough for a man if he's seized by such a drive. But when it happens to a woman, she's done for. It's as if the old earth—" he stretched a hand out, palm open to catch the sun—"said she'd bother no more with seasons, with growth, she'd only see how fast she could spin on her axis, making a new record. You can't see it. Poor Carol. You hate me, you long to escape, to get back to glib flattery, to easy excitement. Yet once you were human."

Carol rocked a little, caught in a swirl of refutation like physical dizziness. "You're really funny!" Her laugh was shrill. "I should think you could see how ridiculous you are. Twisting things about so that I am the one who failed—You shut me out! You ran away! All these words—you're bolstering your own vanity—"

"At first I thought you were like a child, absorbed in a new game. But when the business went under, and the years I'd put in it were sunk, you just weren't there. Be honest, Carol. You were punctilious about the household—and I was an item along with meals and laundry. Too bad I'd lost my job, but you were terribly busy. One job you weren't working at was—shall we say love? And it doesn't get on by itself. You let me down with a thud, my girl, and didn't know or care if I tumbled into hell. Which I did."

Carol turned away, a fist pressed to her mouth, her eye-

lids hot. "I didn't let you down. I tried—" The words came muffled between her knuckles.

"A man has to know that a woman is swung fully toward him, that he's not a minor incident. Well, that's all. You don't see. Your springs have dried up. When I caught the first glimpse of you this morning, with the sun of your soft brown head, brown like a partridge, and the funny little frown between your eyes, I thought, Good God, it can't be over! Here, at this house we built—" He flipped his hands open in a gesture of finality.

Carol gripped the railing, holding her eyelids wide, staring. Against the high blue of the sky she saw color, fragile, hinted in strokes so fine that only a long, a steady look could attest to its existence outside the mind, the rust-red of maple blossoms breaking open fringes of stamens. That had happened since dawn, under the sun.

"There doesn't seem to be anything more to say." Her voice crept out, small; within her went on a grinding, a whirring, as if for once she tried to loosen herself from self.

"All right." Kim's tone darkened, weary. "I'm going back to a town near home. I've found a paper there I can buy. That's why I want to sell this place. You—would you like a divorce? I don't know much about them. Can't you get one for desertion?"

Carol stumbled around, dropped down on the step, hands sliding together between her knees. "Don't you know how difficult you were?" she began, too rapidly. "I tried to help. You—" Oh, what was the truth? Why should this picture he had drawn of her seem to insinuate itself through her own idea, like a distorted reflection in a warped mirror pressing back upon her flesh, supplanting her real image?

"Difficult? I was half crazy. You don't know the blind panic a man feels. It's taken me months to shake out of it, to believe that if I had lost a job I could get another, and if I had lost a woman, I could put a clean end to that. Do you remember when I asked you to come out here to stay? Over two years ago. I thought if I could get away from the wholesale jitters in town, to something simple and funda-

mental, like rocks and weather, if you would come— You thought it was amusing. Well, it no longer matters." He got up, stretching himself slowly, and stepped down to the path. Methodically he began to clear away dead leaves caught along the barberry hedge.

Carol watched him: his coat was shabby, wrinkled across the back, a trouser leg had caught and he didn't shake it down, the dark hair took no gleam from the sun. Dear God, why did her palms suddenly know the shape of that high skull, the texture of the hair? She pressed them hard between her breasts, against the torment there. Was he right, had she failed him? There was no sound in the world except the rustle of dislodged leaves, and the distant running of the brook. From damp under-leaves rose light odor of mold. The whole day worked against her, as subversive as Kim's words, destroying her pride, until doubt of herself ran in bright mockery of quicksilver, eluding her defiance. Kim had to take it back! She wouldn't be the dreadful creature he saw! She had loved him. For a moment, with the terrific inner recoil with which the body meets a sudden shock, she saw as sharply as if she looked with Kim's eyes what these past years, what she had seemed to him. It was true then, to him. Suddenly she was crying, shaken with tears, knuckles bruising her lips against her teeth. He had shut himself away, but she should have followed him, working past his sullenness, his pain. Instead his sensitiveness, the very fineness she had loved, had become a wedge, splitting them apart, until each day they diverged farther. Oh, it was too hard to be a woman, the toil of love was too hard! And unless he loved her again she was ruined, she would wear forever the warped image he had made of her.

"Why are you crying?" Kim stood over her, hands clutching his stick.

"If you had—" she choked— "said some of this a long time ago."

"I couldn't say it till I knew it."

"I'm not dried up! I couldn't hurt so if I were." She pushed herself to her feet, confronting him. The air trembled

against her cheek, charged with expectancy. For a breath, between two instants which parted for a stretch empty of time, poised, Carol felt deep in her flesh, beyond thought, the thrust of new strength. She had to learn to encompass both selves, one humble, surrendering, pursuing, the other alert, proud, hard. "You hear? I'm alive. Kim!" Her fingers bit into his hands. "Where is it you are going? You've got to take me, too. You hear?"

"You mean you'd leave New York? All your affairs there?"

"I don't want to. But I want you again." She held her head high, tears on her lashes making a prism for the altering face Kim bent toward her.

"But you wouldn't be content. It's just a little town."

"If I want to come!" She slid her hands under his arms, drew him, resistant, closer. "I'll deliver papers for you! Then you'll be my boss. Kiss me! I can't stand it—"

"It won't be easy."

"Do I care? What is?"

"This," said Kim, as at last he kissed her.

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